

LEADING FOR TEACHER LEARNING

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This work is dedicated to my family
whose unwavering support encouraged me
to reach farther than I thought I could.

Abstract

Through their own unique learning styles, teachers constantly strive to improve their practice in order to meet the needs of their students as well as the ever increasing and changing demands for which they are responsible. An essential role of a school's leadership is to actively support this learning to ensure the utmost success on behalf of the teachers and more importantly their students. This project endeavours to answer the following question in attempt to help school leaders better understand, and therefore respond to, the needs of their teachers: In what ways can educational leaders, such as principals and vice or assistant-principals support the professional learning of middle school teachers? In addition it explores teachers' and leaders' views on effective activities that are currently being used and those that could be used by educational leaders to most effectively support their individual professional learning. This exploration takes the form of semi-structured interviews with middle school teachers and principals. The results of the interviews are presented in a case-by-case format as well as a general thematic format of emerging trends from the data. These results are then compared to relevant previous research. The conclusion, which strongly advocates for the development of strong, personal relationships between teachers and school leaders, reports a review of the author's suggested recommendations on how these relationships might be fostered and a summary of her own personal learning experience.

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Introduction

Teachers are constantly striving to learn better ways to meet the myriad demands of their profession. Everyday teachers stand before groups of students whose needs are diverse and sometimes overwhelming. Added to their students' needs are the ever increasing, and changing, government mandates and Board policies for which teachers are responsible. Much of teachers' learning is informal; taking place on the job, in the moment and frequently as a result of trial and error. Teachers seize opportunities such as professional development workshops or conferences, hoping the "experts" will provide the panacea to help students succeed. Their learning occurs at workshops but also while they go about their daily activities. The development of more effective strategies that consistently support teachers' learning can only have positive results for both students and teachers. However, teachers can feel isolated in their endeavours. Who can teachers depend on to encourage and provide support for their learning? And, what could that support look like?

It may be fairly contended that if the role of teachers is to support their students' growth, development, and learning, it is likewise the school leaders' role to support the same in teachers. The more effectively each of these roles is fulfilled, the higher potential for student and teacher success. A primary goal for most teachers is to instil a love of learning that will help students succeed well beyond the classroom. Teachers who are supported in their own learning will be better equipped to meet that goal (Blase & Blase, 2000; Brown & Anfara, 2002; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hipp, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997, 1999; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; and Quinn, 2002). The potential exists

to greatly affect improvement and guide professional learning by identifying the leadership strategies as integral for teachers *by* teachers (Blase & Blase, 2000).

Anecdotal evidence from informal conversations with teachers suggests that teachers perceive a key factor in school effectiveness as leadership. Schools are seen as successful when school leaders are viewed as effective. Effective leadership has a profound effect on staff and can be the difference between a community of professionals working together to provide the best possible education for all students rather than a collection of teachers who come in, close their doors and do their own thing.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to answer the question: In what ways can educational leaders, such as principals and vice or assistant-principals, support the professional learning of middle school teachers? Through semi-structured interviews this study specifically identified activities educational leaders currently employ to support the professional learning of a small sample of southern Alberta middle school teachers and administrators. It also explored their views on strategies that *could* be used to make educational leaders more effective in their role of supporting teacher learning.

Since it is teachers' learning needs that are to be met, it follows that teachers should help establish the criteria by which that support can be judged. However, definitions of effective educational leadership found in the literature are most often provided by the leaders themselves. Seldom are voices of the teachers being led heard as clearly, loudly, and individually as they could be (Blase & Blase, 2000). When infrequently asked about their needs and the strategies they would find helpful to support their learning, teachers' individual voices are often merged into a synopsis of trends,

common threads, and consensus (Blase & Blase, 2000; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hipp, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997, 1999; and Quinn, 2002). While this process serves to facilitate a school leader's ability to more quickly adjust to the needs of the whole, it fails to adequately take into account the individual needs of each staff member. In spite of schools' efforts to function as learning communities, personal experience indicates that many teachers still tend to work alone with their students. This study intends to hear the voices of individual teachers as separate and distinct.

Rationale

Opportunities beyond the sometimes minimal daily interaction between teachers and school leaders exist to identify teachers' needs and develop strategies to meet those needs: teacher professional growth plans, satisfaction surveys, and yearly plans. Yet, year after year, meaningful moments with potential to facilitate growth are infrequently optimized. The results of this study will identify strategies that will directly support authentic growth in teachers' learning.

Effective school leaders are those who work towards developing a supportive relationship with each teacher (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach 1999; Mezirow, 1991). But, one size does not fit all. On a larger staff, as is often found at the middle school level, some colleagues will develop stronger and more supportive working relationships than others. Conversations in some staffrooms and teacher parking lots can serve as anecdotal evidence that what is perceived as effective leadership is not always shared. However, all teachers have an equal right for their individual professional learning needs to be met, whether or not those needs match the leadership style of their

principals. Moreover, students deserve to be taught by professionals whose own learning needs are being met.

This project targets teachers and school leaders in middle schools. This is timely in the southern Alberta context as five years ago one of the largest school districts in the area changed from the conventional elementary (K-6), junior high (7-9) and high school (10-12) model to a middle school configuration to better meet the unique learning needs of these students who require specialized teachers with specific training and sensitivity to adolescent development. By extension, these teachers need effective and unique leadership strategies to guide and support their professional learning.

It is anticipated through this research that strategies used by educational leaders to support individual teachers' learning will be identified, explored, and celebrated. These strategies will be shared and may be implemented by members of the profession who strive to support teachers as they work to make a significant difference in their students' learning and achievement.

My Personal Engagement with the Study

During my 9 years as a teacher, I have worked with leaders who have taken time to discover what I need and have made an effort to meet those needs. These leaders fostered a willingness and desire to become actively involved in school initiatives and to step outside my comfort zone. Conversely, I am less inclined to engage in activities not directly related to my classroom when working with leaders whom I perceive have not taken a personal interest in who I am and what I need as a teacher. Perceive is the operative word as my perception is my reality, regardless of the actions of others.

This is illustrated by two personal examples. One administrator I worked with was dismayed to read in the school's evaluation survey that teachers felt the administration did not provide a clear vision to the staff. The administrator felt a lot of hard work had been put into several initiatives designed to do exactly that, yet teachers weren't aware of them. Based on their individual perceptions, each was right and both were disappointed. Another example comes from a vice-principal who believed that distributing professional articles to be an effective way of supporting teaching learning. In discussions with the teachers, only a couple actually read the articles. The rest had little interest as the articles were selected and distributed without consultation or discussion.

If the teaching staff is not aware of the strategies being implemented, they are likely not as effective as they could be. On the other hand, unless teachers are explicit in identifying their needs, how is the leadership to know a need is going unchecked? Many administrators mention an open door policy as an effective strategy. What happens if teachers don't feel comfortable walking through the door? What if they do but no one is there? A shared understanding is often missing or erroneously assumed. It is my intent that this study will assist in bridging the gap.

My curiosity relating to the primary question of this study and my chosen research methods are a direct result of personal experience. The question evolved from my experience and my methodology is a reflection of how I make sense of my world. I have experience with effective and ineffective leadership. Through conversation, I know that colleagues do not always agree with my perceptions of the effectiveness. This ties in both with Mezirow's (1991) learning theories, which will be further explored in the next

section, as well as Glesne's (2006) understanding of the relationship between a researcher and his or her own view of the world, where one has a direct influence on the other. As a teacher-researcher, I am compelled to discover the extent to which my perceptions are shared by others. In terms of research-for-the-researcher I am deeply curious to compare the strategies I find effective in supporting my professional learning and growth to those of my colleagues so that in my own leadership roles I will be better prepared to support others.

This research may provide guidance to teachers new to administrative roles. It may lend support to strategies currently being implemented and identify areas for professional development on the part of current and future middle school administrators. Professional organizations and professional development consortiums may plan future continuing education programs based on the core leadership qualities and individualized needs of middle school teachers. It is my sincere hope that others find my work helpful. Ultimately however, I am doing this for my own professional learning and the difference I hope to make with teachers.

Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to examine the educational literature for the building blocks of the primary research questions. It will begin by examining educational leadership theories and the need for further study. It will then look at adult learning theories and finally, it will provide some background into middle schools and their guiding philosophies.

Effective Leadership

In Leithwood and Jantzi's (1997) exploration of the question of "what factors influence teachers to attribute leadership qualities to their principals" (p. 312) they build on Lord and Maher's (as cited in Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997) findings that leadership is not a question of position but rather an acceptance and recognition by those being led of behaviours identified as leadership. Their discussion identifies various factors leading to the acknowledgment of leadership and, subsequently, the followers' "consent to be led", as described by Greenfield (as cited in Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997). This speaks to the importance of hearing individual teachers' voices when defining effective educational leadership behaviours since, according to Leithwood and Jantzi, their acceptance is a prerequisite to a leader's effectiveness.

Leithwood and Jantzi's model of how perceptions are formed suggests followers have a personal "implicit or explicit leadership theory" (p. 4) from which behaviours of an identified leader are assessed. If the observed behaviours of a potential leader find a strong match with an individual's leadership theory, leadership potential will be realized. This reflects the need for those in leadership positions to recognize needs of individual teachers in order to create a strong match. Behaviours identified as effective leadership by some will not be acknowledged by others. The key is to identify behaviours that are commonly identified despite difference in individual leadership theories. This resonates with the need for leaders to develop personal relationships with each staff member so that personal leadership theories can be shared and fulfilled.

Through survey data collected from 1632 teachers from 100 Ontario elementary schools and 746 teachers from 15 secondary schools, Leithwood and Jantzi (1997)

summarized that teachers' perceptions of leadership are based on two sets of variables: alterable and unalterable. How the alterable are altered and how the unalterable are dealt with provides the basis for the perceptions. Essentially, teachers' perceptions of effective leadership hinge on leaders being seen doing good work on behalf of the school. Ultimately, actions, and their effects, speak loudest when it comes to what matters to teachers.

The literature is full of suggestions of what "good work" leaders should be seen doing. Unfortunately, as Sergiovanni explains, we're "importing theories of leadership from management disciplines, practices from corporations, baseball teams, armies and transportation systems. They do not serve our needs. We need to develop our own theories" (as cited in Brown & Anfara, 2002, p. 35). The challenge lies in maintaining the balance between teachers' and leaders' voices during that development.

Within the larger context of transformational leadership Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinback (1999) focus on practices that contribute to developing people and classify them under three main headings: individualized support, intellectual stimulation and modelling practices and values. The first category incorporates behaviours that demonstrate a leader's respect and concern for individual's psychological needs of trust, equality, acceptance, and belonging. Individualized support also looks to provide followers with both emotional support and resources necessary to encourage implementation of initiatives, ideas, and new practices. Leaders who are adept in this area understand the importance of building relationships and recognizing good work. They are active listeners who follow through on collaborative decisions (pp. 72-73).

The second category, creating intellectual stimulation, encompasses practices that promote reflection. According to Leithwood et al., this precipitates through the development of a supportive environment where professionalism is expected, taking risks is encouraged, and conflict is anticipated and viewed as opportunity. This facet of developing people also challenges the status quo. It demands that teachers take a critical look at what, how, and why they do what they do (pp. 75-77). Schön (as cited in Furlong, 2000) illustrates this well in his levels of consciousness that describe the process by which teachers go from the intuitive “knowing-in-action” level of consciousness where a teacher’s thinking is implicit to the higher “reflection-on-action” level of consciousness that requires the articulation of reasons and thought processes that guided actions (p.22). However, Leithwood et al. take it even further by incorporating the need for action based on the reflection. This is accomplished by seeking out new ideas, opportunities for professional conversations, and innovative practices by facilitating participation in both in-house and outside professional development activities (pp.72-73).

The last category boils down to walking the walk and talking the talk. This dimension of developing people provides an example to follow that embodies a commitment to the vision, values, and beliefs of the school. It is here that a leader demonstrates his or her commitment by getting involved in the activities of the school. Professional growth is demonstrated as a priority through a leader’s solicitation and response to constructive criticism. It is also under the heading of modeling that the more character based elements such as trust, integrity, and respect are classified (p. 80).

Brown and Anfara’s (2002) exploratory study surveyed 125 middle school principals from which 17 were selected for phenomenological interviews. Although

“based on self-reporting” (p. 44), Brown and Anfara do provide another argument to support further study of educational leadership. They examine how the separation of teaching and administration has grown more pronounced since the early 1900s (p. 34) resulting in “organizationally clueless teachers and educationally uninformed administrators” (p. 35). According to their findings, school administrators recognize this chasm and their need to actively advocate for greater unification with teachers. This is remains pertinent in Alberta as the new Minister of Education only recently settled the long unresolved Alberta Commission on Learning’s recommendation that school administrators be removed from the Alberta Teachers’ Association with the decision that they are to remain an integral part of the association.

The practice of effective leadership strategies being identified by leaders generates a question: Why are strategies not more often identified by those potentially most affected by their effectiveness: the teachers? According to Blase and Blase (2000), theirs is the “first comprehensive empirical report of the experiences of teachers – as reported by teachers...” (p. 2). In their report 809 teachers from all levels answered questionnaires focused on finding “what characteristics of school principals positively influence classroom teachers and what effect do such characteristics have on classroom instructions” (p. 1). Their findings are classified under “two major themes: talking with teachers to promote reflection and promoting professional growth” (p. 3). Although these themes resonate with findings of other researchers (Blase & Blase, 2000; Brown & Anfara, 2002; Hipp, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997; and Quinn, 2002) the strategies identified as supporting “valued dialogue” such as making suggestions both during post-observation conferences and modeling, suggest a more structured form of leadership than

the supervisory role of the administrators under the current teacher supervision and evaluation policies of Alberta Education. Under the current *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy* (Alberta Learning, 2003), teacher supervision guidelines include general directions to “providing support and guidance” and “collecting information from any source about the quality of teaching” (p. 3). Although teachers may request an evaluation, it is not usually until there are “reasons requiring evaluation” (p. 3), with the implication that teacher quality standards are not being met, that specific pre and post observation conferences are scheduled. Because of this discrepancy between current policy and research based practices, it will be interesting to compare the leadership model proposed by Blase and Blase to one developed from the responses of teachers working under a less formal model such as developing, implementing, and review of professional growth plans.

In many leadership studies, survey respondents are leaders and teachers from various grade levels and specializations. This diverse mix of survey respondents is another noticeable trend in the literature. Rarely is there a pure sample of respondents from just one level, such as elementary, middle or secondary. If there is such a strong argument for specialized instruction and programming for students at the middle school level that districts are willing to undergo a massive shift of students, staff, and resources, wouldn't there be a need to specialize leadership strategies as well? In his literature analysis Quinn (2002) quotes research that supports this hypothesis. According to Quinn, “Larson and Harty (1987) found major differences between elementary and secondary principals and teachers' perceptions of how instructional leadership behaviours were being implemented” (as cited in Quinn, 2002, p. 449). Quinn also mentions Johnson and

Holdaway who in 1990 “examined instructional practices among elementary and secondary principals and found disparities between the two levels” (as cited in Quinn, 2002, p. 449). This is further supported by Leithwood and Jantzi’s (1997) quote of Tabin and Coleman who found that “elementary teachers are more likely than secondary teachers to possess leader prototypes that include female traits and behaviours, and transformational leadership practices” (as cited in Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997, p. 5). It seems logical that teachers at the middle school level would have leadership prototypes unique to their particular grade configuration.

Another point made by Quinn (2002) is the fact that much of the educational leadership research is based in the United States, with the notable exception of much of Leithwood’s work. Quinn (ibid) “recognized that this research occurs in the context of US images of principal leadership. One cannot presume generalizability to other nations” (p. 461). Yet, contextual homogeneity frequently occurs, perhaps to the detriment of Canadian and Alberta based research.

The limitations of generalizability mentioned by Quinn (2002) relate to a need identified in all the research used in this review for further study in the field of principal-teacher relationships. As previously mentioned, Blase and Blase’s (2000) call for further study based on the “emergence of diverse related issues in the literature” (p.7). Leithwood and Jantzi (1997) point out that “very little is known about leader perceptions on the part of teachers” (p. 11). Hipp (1996) states that “further study is needed to examine the validity of principals transformational leadership as findings between similar studies differ” (p. 30). And finally, Brown and Anfara (2002) recognize that “it is time to

rebuild the field of educational administration with a pedagogical scaffolding...” (p. 47). Based on these assertions there is a clear argument for further study in this area.

However, the most influential reason for further study has been articulated by Leithwood and Jantzi (1997). “This is an important question for principals if they are to exercise the kinds of influence in their schools to which most of them aspire and which is expected of them by almost everyone else”. This is further supported by Hipp (1996) in her findings on “Teacher Efficacy: Influence of Principal Leadership Behaviour”. Her quantitative study using survey data, telephone interviews, structured interviews, observational data and field notes of middle school principals and teachers, found “significant relationships between leadership behaviours and teachers’ sense of efficacy” (p. 16). Taken with Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2000) findings that “principal effects on classroom conditions were indirect through school conditions” (p.419) and “principal leadership makes a disappointing contribution to student engagement” (p. 428) Hipp’s (ibid) assertion that “teachers expressed feelings of confidence and appreciation for certain and consistent behaviours on the part of their principals and their focus of creating a positive change” (p. 20) provides a clear avenue for principals to significantly affect the success of students through effective leadership of teachers.

Hipp’s (1996) further contention that the “most important resource in our school is the teacher, yet issues most central to the health of the teaching profession continue to be ignored” (p. 2) has a strong link to the earlier argument that the teachers’ voice is often lost in leadership research. Teachers need a strong sense of efficacy. No one is in a better position to support and encourage them than school leaders. Norris (1991) explains that “since the goal of supervision is to assist teachers in their efforts to educate students,

supervisors must be concerned with their supervising behaviour and whether it succeeds in motivating teachers” (p. 132). It is implied that this motivation relates to teaching *and* learning.

Professional Learning

Many conditions, strategies, activities, and phases of professional development associated with adult learning may resonate with teacher learners as they reflect on positive or negative learning experiences. Adult learning theories such as those advanced by Rogers, *andragogy* as explained by Knowles, and Mezirow’s *transformative learning* provide valuable insight into why and how adults learn; important information for school leaders interested in supporting teacher’s professional learning. Such conditions as the freedom of choice, the need for a challenging purpose, a climate of respect, opportunities to work with others, and time to reflect are common threads found throughout the solid literature base. How to meet those needs effectively becomes the more pressing question that this study will attempt to answer.

Before we can look at learning theories, the definition of learning must be explored. According to Rogers (2002) and Mezirow (1991), learning is the process by which we create meaning from an experience that causes us to change our ways of thinking, feeling or acting. Exactly how that happens and what conditions are necessary for it to occur remain open for debate. The resulting diverse body of work attempts to differentiate adult learning from pedagogy while still respecting all types of learning. Few seem yet to have done so (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

None of the learning frameworks can be applied to all learners or all learning situations, but there are broad categorizations. Some of the theories take a more

behaviourist approach where the educator prepares the context in which an externally motivated learner will learn to change his or her behaviour based on positive or negative consequences. Others focus on a cognitivist perspective more concerned with the development of mental capacity through prepared materials which are used to shape meaning on an increasingly complex basis. A humanist would argue that facilitating the growth and development of the whole person is the role of the educator who must respect the personal goals of the learner. These are contrasted with a social or situational orientation where learners move from the margins towards full membership in the community of practice through the interaction with others and the environment (Merriam & Caffarella as cited in Smith, 1999; Rogers, 2002).

One attempt to marshal these theories into a cohesive explanation is *andragogy*, as proposed by Knowles (1990, 1984). His andragogical model is a framework of assumptions on which educators reflect critically in order to meet the needs of the adult learner. Educators using an andragogical model must recognize adult learners' need to understand the purpose of the learning and its importance to their lives. According to Knowles (1990), adult learners also need to be able to choose the direction, and have some ownership, of their learning. Adults' wealth of experience and knowledge influences how they interpret their world, both positively and negatively. This must be respected to create a climate conducive to learning through participative discourse. Past experience must be considered as it prepares learners for new experiences, including a readiness to learn. Within the context of andragogy, adult learners must recognize how an explicit learning situation will help them deal with difficulties encountered in their daily lives. Lastly, the complex issue of motivation must also be understood. Although

Knowles (1984, 1990) identifies external factors as having motivating properties, he recognizes that the most powerful motivation comes from within each learner. Helping teachers maximize the potential of that internal motivation is the role of educational leaders.

An alternative learning theory to consider is *transformational learning* (Mezirow, 1991) which attempts to understand how adults make meaning from their experiences. Within the context of this theory, learners delve deeply into their assumptions and preconceptions to “change the way [they] construe the meaning of experience” (p. 196). According to Mezirow there are four learning processes through which we advance our current understandings, develop new ones, re-shape old ones, and adjust the way we perceive the world. These processes occur effectively because ideal learning conditions exist within the communicative domain (p. 198). Within this context learners pursue individually determined goals. Learners have access to all necessary information. They are able to consider alternative perspectives and judge the merits of different arguments through critical reflection in an environment where their opportunity to participate is balanced by the participation of others and where validation is achieved through “informed, objective and rational consensus.” (p. 198). These conditions then become the basis for adult learning programmes whose goal is to help learners learn what they want to learn while continuing to develop what they already know (Mezirow, 1991).

Although these theories of learning differ from each other, common themes emerge. All three authors agree that adult learning requires voluntary participation in, and reflection on, purposeful action that creates new meaning in a collaborative, respectful climate.

Middle School

Major change is accompanied by dissonant voices, each professing the validity of their argument and this southern Alberta's school district's decision to reconfigure schools to remove junior high schools and create middle schools was no different. Some educational conservatives within the district agreed with Chester Finn's (2005) *Mayhem in the Middle* report in which "middle schoolism" was identified as "another education fad that should be consigned to history's dustbin" (p. 2). Others, along with the National Middle School Association (2005), "focus on the learning and achievement of every student while responding to the unique characteristics of young adolescent learner" (p.1). Still other teachers in the district were heard voicing their beliefs that the only reason for change is to influence infrastructure usage reports to justify new infrastructure planning and that, other than student distribution, very few pedagogical changes would occur.

The idea to specifically configure schools to address the unique developmental and educational needs of young adolescents is not new. Manning (2000) explains the initiative began in 1909 when the first three year junior high schools were established in Columbus, Ohio. From that point the middle level education debate began and evolved, always centered on questions and concerns as to whether the system was actually serving the needs and interests of the targeted age group of 10 to 15 year olds. In response to the debate, the first middle school was established in Bay City, Michigan in 1950. Over the next several decades the middle school movement continued to grow based on the ideas of a core curriculum, guidance programs, and exploratory options provided by teacher teams committed to interdisciplinary learning with a shift away from competitive sports.

Jackson and Davis (2000), assert that middle school reform is an act of social justice in that every young adolescent deserves an equal opportunity to succeed. They also state that “It is dangerous economically and unjust morally to educate millions of American youth poorly when we have the knowledge and the means to educate them well” (p. 15). They extend that to say that by caring about every adolescent, “we will move closer to realizing our cherished ideals of lasting, shared prosperity with equal opportunity for all” (p. 15). There is also the assertion that without intense focus on improving student learning, structural and organization changes will have minimal impact on student achievement.

In the final chapters of *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, Jackson & Davis (2000) take a step back from classroom strategies to look at the more foundational issues; one being the area of professional learning. Here they are clear that middle schools should be staffed with professionals specially trained in the unique learning needs of young adolescents. It is also clear that professional development plans be “results driven, standards based, and embedded in teachers’ daily work” instead of the more typical staff development that resembles “adult pull-out programs” (p. 110). Accordingly, these plans should begin with the same question as the process to develop effective standards: “What do we expect all middle grades students to know and be able to do?” and further extend to “What must teachers know and be able to do to support their students’ achievement of these expectations? and How must staff development be designed to support high levels of learning for all staff and students?” (p. 110). Jackson and Davis assertions are also reiterated by Elmore (2002) who says that principals and districts have the responsibility to ensure that teacher growth is supported with both time

and money, and that the process be reciprocal. As explained by Elmore (2002) “for every increment of performance demanded from you, [there is] an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation [and] that for every investment made in [your] skill and knowledge, [you] have the responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance” (p.5).

The various organizational structures designed to facilitate the middle school ideal explored by Jackson and Davis reinforce the understandings asserted by Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, and Austin (1997). The issue is not how schools are physically organized, although the configuration of the building can support the programmes. Rather it is how staff and programmes themselves are organized within the physical space. Many of the models outlined by Jackson and Davis seem to be closely related to the tenets of Professional Learning Communities as described by Dufour and Eaker (1998). They demand a collective commitment of a staff and the district guided by strong leadership from the school leaders.

Regardless of the specific aspect of education explored the goal is always to improve student learning. Although the impetus for this project is to identify specific strategies effective in supporting middle school teachers’ professional learning, it is for the ultimate purpose of improving learning. Only in this case, the definition of student is broadened to include teachers.

Methodology

Research Question

As discussed previously, the purpose of this research is to determine strategies used by educational leaders to support teacher learning. Individual perspectives are

crucial in this endeavor. Just as each student has individual learning needs that respond best to specific teaching techniques, strategies supportive of teacher learning that resonate with one teacher might be ineffective, or even go unnoticed, for another. Therefore, this study will explore the primary question:

In what ways can educational leaders support the professional learning of middle school teachers?

This question is built upon several key words and phrases, each with complex meaning. Phrases such as *educational leaders*, *professional learning* and *middle school teachers* have explicit connotations and specialized meaning that are defined in the following section in order to provide specific focus and context.

The term *educational leaders* was chosen over the titles principals, vice principals, associate principals, or school administrator. This term acknowledges that roles and responsibilities of those in formal leadership positions in schools are often allocated and shared in subtle, yet distinct, ways. Terms like principals, vice, or assistant principals could indicate a hierarchy or a division of responsibility when, in fact, the responsibility is shared. Although it is understood that school leaders are charged with myriad business and management responsibilities, it is the objective of this study to focus on their educational leadership role in supporting teachers as opposed to tasks such as balancing the school budget.

The typical words used to describe opportunities for teachers' learning are *professional development*. However, the term often carries with it strong images of short, one-off workshops with catchy titles, canned material, and greasy doughnuts. This is not the process this study will explore. Instead, professional learning was chosen to highlight

a more sustained and in-depth experience. It will look at a multi faceted process that incorporates the stand alone professional development activities traditionally associated with professional learning, as well as the continual process through which teachers transform meaning from their experience. The term is also meant to integrate aspects of the adult learning theories put forth by such authors as Knowles (1990), Rogers (2002), and Mezirow (1991).

Finally, the specific focus of middle school was chosen because of the unique characteristics of its students, curricula, and philosophy. Middle schools are designed to better serve the exclusive developmental needs of adolescent learners. To achieve that requires educators with an exceptional set of understandings and sensibilities. Therefore, middle school teachers are distinct from other groups and, it would follow, have a similarly diverse breadth and depth of learning needs.

Participants

This study involved the analysis of interview transcripts with middle school leaders and teachers in an effort to determine which activities are most effective in supporting teachers' professional learning. The data collection process for this research consisted of audio-taped, semi-structured interviews with seven participants. Initially, participants were recruited by letter (Appendix A) distributed through the interschool mail system of a southern Alberta school district. The intended audience included all teachers, principals, and other individuals with middle school teaching or administrative experience. Addressees were determined using the staff lists published by the local teachers' association. This audience included approximately 150 potential participants. Through follow-up emails (Appendix B) and individual telephone conversations

(Appendix C), a participant group of seven was finalized. As the number of those willing to participate exceeded seven, inclusion in the study was determined through a stratified random sampling which balanced the age, gender, location, and experience of the participants for a broader range of viewpoints.

Of 150 letters that were sent out to invite participation in the study, 32 people responded within the required time frame. Using the above mentioned process, seven participants were selected. The resulting participant demographic included two school principals, one male and one female. Five teachers were selected, two of who were female and three male. Within the participants there was representation from each of the district's three middle schools. The experience of the participants ranged from one year to 28. One participant's experience is particularly unique and deserves a special mention. Technically, this is his sixth year of experience but his first five were taught without having completed a degree in Education. He taught under a letter of authority with a private school. He has since earned his education degree and is currently teaching under a temporary contract with a local school board. Three of seven participants have completed their Masters of Education degree and one is currently working towards the same.

Data Collection

The phenomenological nature of this study will allow individual perspectives to resonate. Van Manen (1982) says that phenomenology “lets shine through that which tends to hide itself” and that “it is in and through the words that the shining through (the invisible) becomes visible” (p. 299). As it is the goal of this research project to illuminate otherwise unnoticed strategies employed by educational leaders to support teacher learning, phenomenology as a type of “pedagogical reflection” (p. 283) is an appropriate

fit to guide this project's interpretive methodology. It is an effective lens through which to explore individual experiences as it "guides us back from the theoretical abstractions to the reality of lived experiences" (p. 296). By asking participants to describe their experiences, their oral stories will allow details to be gleaned that would go unreported if they were instead asked to fill out a questionnaire or other impersonal data collection tool. Contextual cues, body language, voice tone and pitch, facial expression, word choice, and the opportunity to return to previously discussed themes, aspects which speak to the phenomenological nature of this study, will add layers of essential detail to their individual perspectives that might otherwise be lost.

Before the interview began, participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D). The researcher kept a copy with the records of the project while another copy was kept by the participant. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to respond to questions and prompts (Appendix E) designed to elicit their personal stories related to effective leadership strategies specific to supporting teacher learning. The questions and prompts were meant to guide the conversation along a specific path. However, the participants determined where, and for how long, to pause and reflect on the view. The open-ended design allowed participants to reflect on their experience and encouraged them to respond with descriptions of their own in a rich and detailed manner, to pursue emergent themes, and request elaboration. Throughout the interviews, the researcher kept detailed field notes to track emerging themes, patterns, and relationships which helped guide the later coding process of data analysis. Anonymity was completely protected with the use of pseudonyms throughout the inquiry, in the transcripts, and in the final text. Any portion of participants' responses that may

have identified actual individuals was replaced with pseudonyms. When describing demographic information of participants, no individually identifying information was disclosed.

The primary researcher conducted conversational interviews which were audio-taped, with the permission of each participant, and transcribed into text. Transcripts were then sent to each individual for a participant check to ensure their validity. With the exception of participant validation of the transcript and analysis particular to each individual, the coding and analysis of the text was the sole responsibility of the primary researcher. Only the researcher had access to the raw data (audio-tapes, interview notes) and the transcripts in electric form. Interview notes, and electronic data were stored on an external memory device and will be preserved in a secure filing cabinet. In five years they will be destroyed. Once the interview, transcribing, and verification process was complete, the data was coded using the three review practices: open, axial, and selective coding as described by Neuman (1997, p. 422 – 423).

Data Analysis Method

The data analysis is where, as Mezirow (1991) contends, the learning takes place. This is where the researcher makes sense of the experience by considering and reflecting on the gathered data. The process began during the data collection process as the researcher makes note of commonalities, contrasts, and insights that warranted further consideration (Neuman, 1997, pp. 422-426). During open coding, the data, in the form of interview transcripts and field notes, was reviewed for recurring themes and concepts. These umbrella topics were used as the basis for categorical labels for subsequent reviews. The second reading of the data, the axial coding process, was used to determine

the appropriateness of the code labels developed during the open coding process. It highlighted any necessary adjustments to the existing labels or indicated if new ones were needed. In the selective coding process, the third pass of the transcripts and field notes, the data was mined for illustrative examples and non-examples to support the themes and concepts determined by the categorizing labels. These labels directed the organization of information into comparative and contrasting examples which guided the ultimate analysis and conclusions (Neuman, 1997, pp. 422-426). Throughout this process, words, sentences, and clusters of ideas in the data were colour coded to correspond to the determined labels in order to highlight their connections and comparisons. At the same time, notes of insights and understanding were maintained to later be woven into the final product ensuring that “ah-ha” moments were not lost but included as an integral part of the written analysis.

Interview Results

Case Specific Summaries

In order to preserve the individual voice of each participant, a main impetus for this project, the results of the interviews will be presented in two formats. Firstly, each interview will be summarized individually in order to present a more coherent synopsis of that participant’s experience. Secondly, a thematic summary of the trends emerging from all the interviews will be presented with references to and quotes from specific interview participants. It should be reiterated that the participants’ personal descriptions were altered or concealed to protect their anonymity.

Ms. A

Ms. A has the most diverse range of experience of all the interview participants including 7 years teaching experience in grades ranging from division II through IV and 12 years experience in school administration in Junior High, Elementary and Middle School. She earned her combined bachelors of Arts and Science and Education degrees in the late 1980s and her master's degree in Educational Leadership in the early 90s. Although she spent only one year at a middle school, most of her experience does pertain to early adolescence. Her diverse background provides a well-rounded perspective from which she drew her responses during the interview.

Ms. A's request that the interview take place in her school office offered a unique opportunity. Sitting in her office, mementos of family, travel, and opportunities shared with colleagues attest to her commitment to a balanced lifestyle and offer a glimpse of her personal values. The shelves are neatly organized with professional literature and binders of information necessary to her current position. A few bright yellow sticky notes are placed carefully next to the keyboard on an otherwise uncluttered desktop. These contextual clues support her claim that she works hard and plays hard. They provide a background that adds resonance to her voice.

Ms. A's approach to her own professional learning is a culmination of factors. Her definition of professional learning does not necessarily mean learning new skills or developing new understandings. Instead, it is more based on the assurance of competence with areas that can be improved. Her learning process begins by identifying that which she already knows to be true but isn't doing consistently. Then she turns to colleagues with similar interests to glean what she can from their expertise. She accesses

professional literature, research, and workshops to develop a knowledge base from which to improve her practice.

During the interview, several themes emerged in relation to her values concerning professional learning. The first theme is the need for a personal network of colleagues which is important to Ms. A for several reasons. They act as a sounding board on which to bounce ideas; offering feedback, advice, validation, and verbal support. She believes that sharing with others and hearing positive feedback builds momentum. This network is also a deep source of information that can be accessed to help answer complex questions. Finally, this group that she has developed throughout her career adds an element of accountability as they follow-up on conversations with questions and comments. Throughout the interview, Ms. A often referred to discussions with colleagues and district leaders when illustrating ways she felt supported in her learning.

The second emerging theme is her solid belief in the power of a common goal and vision. According to Ms. A, bringing a staff together around a common goal provides strong roots from which everyone will grow. It allows teachers who are knowledgeable, engaged, and passionate to assume leadership roles. These teachers then help grow the idea from the ground up by bringing others on board while being supported from above by those in formal leadership positions. Ms. A also expressed her belief that a common goal and vision should be the basis for teachers' professional growth plans. They can serve as an impetus for those who may be reluctant to seek professional learning opportunities beyond the trial and error of their classrooms as well as provide a conversation point for encouragement.

The first two themes tie directly to the third: Ms. A's clear belief in the importance of professional conversation. The networks bring people together while a common goal and vision lends purpose and direction to the conversation. Ms. A described, that in the case of professional conversations within a school, the networks may not be personally developed over the course of a career. Instead, these networks may be based on grade level teams, subject specific teams or colleagues with common interests. Regardless of their formation, creating opportunities for these networks to come together and discuss the course of action directed by a common goal is a crucial element to the success of teacher learning. The strength of her conviction resonated through Ms. A's assertion that working with others toward a common goal, especially one with a long term focus that allows you to sink your teeth into it harnesses the power of team.

In terms of a school leaders' role throughout all this, Ms. A was quite clear in her expectations. She feels that a leader's role is to provide encouragement to persevere when things aren't going well. It is also to reinforce when you are on the right track by validating one's efforts. Ms. A explained that leaders should help fill in the blanks and make sure everything is in place to move forward. They should guide teachers through the process to make sure all the bases are covered and provide encouragement along the way. Ms. A also sees leadership as a buffer between those who might not share similar perspectives by diffusing the situation and guiding resolution. Her understanding that school leaders often face the dichotomy of supporting the individual while bringing everyone together towards a common purpose was clearly expressed in her statement that there is "flexibility for individual pursuits within the driving purpose of a common goal". She described situations where leaders should have a more global perspective of

individual staff members' interest, goals and questions so they can act as a conduit to bring people together who may be unaware of a common goal. According to Ms. A, this is particularly important when working with beginning teachers who have not had the opportunity to develop their own network. Establishing these links between people facilitates pooling resources and creates the potential for synergy.

Mr. B

Mr. B has only recently assumed the role of principal in a middle school. Prior to this, he served as a high school vice-principal for six years. Overall, he has twenty-eight years of experience in classrooms ranging from grades 9 to 12. For the purpose of this project, his lack of middle school specific experience was easily mitigated by his commitment to supporting teacher learning. His wealth of formal leadership experience adds a unique edge to his teacher learning paradigm.

This interview also took place in the participant's school office. More than any other participant, Mr. B used anecdotes from his past to exemplify his point. This gave a relaxed and comfortable tone to a somewhat divergent interview. The contextual clues offered by his surroundings were helpful in providing snapshots of what he values. The scarcity of personal items gave few hints to who he is outside the school environment but there were still enough to glean some background information. His evident interest and participation in football speaks to his belief in team and physical fitness. Select memorabilia, souvenirs, and awards grace the shelves and walls in acknowledgement of his achievements. Perhaps worthy of note is the configuration of his office. Whereas in Ms. A's office the desk was pushed back against the wall creating a small, barrier-free seating area, in Mr. B's office a large L-shaped desk protrudes into the centre of the

room, allowing for one seating arrangement only: Mr. B seated behind his desk and visitors on the other side. Although this arrangement is probably unconscious, it serves to establish a more formal position of authority. While this may be helpful when dealing with recalcitrant students, it raises the question: do teachers pick up unintentional cues of hierarchy?

Mr. B designs his learning opportunities around his areas of interest. He looks for new challenges among current issues in education and that will help improve his practice. In his own words he's always "adding a new tool to the tool box." He views the mandated practice of teacher professional growth plans as too formal. He sees professional learning as an individual improving oneself to become a better teacher. To do this, Mr. B begins by accessing traditional professional development such as conferences and workshops. According to him, these opportunities may provide practice changing moments such as a conversation with an international expert.

Opportunities to engage in professional conversation came up repeatedly during our conversation. It was clear that Mr. B values talking with other professionals. He treasures those occasions that cannot be predicted nor planned. Mr. B spoke of how listening to the gurus, international speakers, and experts provide fodder for stimulating conversation. For him, it is through conversation that synergy develops. His own enthusiasm for the process energized his voice as he described a staff meeting where he'd changed the format to incorporate more active participation of the staff, hoping to provide an authentic learning opportunity for the teachers and the powerful energy it creates.

In his role of school leader, Mr. B uses professional dialogue to guide teachers in their own learning. He does this through individual meetings at the beginning of the year;

a practice he feels is very important. The teacher's professional growth plan is a spring board for these discussions which often incorporate all manner of pedagogical issues.

According to Mr. B, the most important role of a school leader when using professional dialogue to support teacher learning is to listen. "Listen, listen, listen" he repeated for emphasis. Listen to all stakeholders: teachers, students, parents, and the community. Ensure effective communication and then take action as necessary. At this point, Mr. B emphasized another point of great importance to him, although it didn't emerge as a theme: the absolute need for integrity. Mr. B explained that once you've created the opportunity for conversation, actively listened to what was said, and determined the necessary course of action, it is imperative to do what you said you were going to while remaining true to your values.

Following through on what needs to be done leads directly to the second theme of Mr. B's interview which is the school leader's role to "make sure whatever needs to happen in order to support teachers happens". One story that Mr. B used to illustrate his point concerns past practice. According to him, before his tenure began, teacher teams were discouraged from attending professional development workshops together because of the resulting increase in behaviour issues the office had to deal with. Mr. B explained that one of the first things he tried was to remove barriers and let teachers know that he was open to them being involved in as many professional development opportunities as possible and that they were not to feel guilty about the time it took them away from the classroom because in the end, the reward far outweighed the cost. He also acknowledged that other systems needed to be set in place so that having a large number of substitute teachers in at once did not create an increase in behaviour issues; a more proactive

approach. Having a plan in place that allows flexibility to maximize opportunities is another important element in making sure that what needs to happen happens, as is providing support in the form of financial resources, time, and establishing connections between people with similar interests.

As with Ms. A's interview, the initial themes tie closely with the last. In Mr. B's case, supporting grass root initiatives is very important. He does this by frequently talking with teachers and doing his best to make sure that any barriers to their success are removed. One of the reasons this is so important to Mr. B is that he recognizes that top down mandated professional development doesn't work. People don't buy in and eventually resentment begins to build. Developing opportunities, such as making institutional changes that allow teachers to get together to grow their ideas from the ground up, has the added potential of motivating those teachers who may not initiate their own professional development. Through this, Mr. B believes that a school can support individual growth and the common goals identified by the whole.

Ms. C

Of all the interviews, Ms. C's was the most impassioned, running the gamut from laughter to tears. This is similar to her years of teaching, according to Ms. C. Since completing her bachelor of education degree, her more than 20 years of experience have ranged from grades one through eight. Her continuous search for better ways to help students has sustained her enthusiasm for teaching through best practice. Motivated by her dedication for professional development, she went on to earn her Master of Education degree.

Ms. C's interview took place in her grade eight classroom. From behind the group work table and rows of student desks, her desk is framed by pictures of family and celebratory occasions with colleagues. On the walls are encouraging posters, thematically designed bulletin boards and examples of student work. Evidence of her foray into assessment for and of learning can be found on the rubrics attached to the student work showing both self and teacher assessment. These small windows into what she values provide a richer context through which to understand her responses.

Ms. C's professional learning is based on a two-pronged approach. The first is what she calls "her theoretical stage" which includes determining her goals by learning about the priorities of her school, her district, Alberta Learning, and the Alberta Teachers' Association. Citing authors such as Dr. David Berliner and Dr. Stephen Murgatroyd (she's the only participant to cite research during the interview) she explains that she doesn't necessarily align her goals with any others but uses them to guide her personal direction. From there she accesses current research and seeks out colleagues who can provide additional support through their understanding of the issue at hand. Throughout this process she develops the theoretical background she feels necessary before moving on to "her practical stage" including attending formal professional development sessions, workshops, and conferences. She concentrates on wrapping her head around the theory in order to be able to visualize a practical implementation for her class.

Ms. C is motivated to seek out resources but is quick to point out that it is so much easier, the benefits and success so much greater when shared with others. For Ms. C, working with colleagues is perhaps the most important means of support available

when promoting teacher learning. When she described situations where she was able to work with colleagues on a long term focus that allowed teacher and student skills to be taught, developed, and reinforced her voice was passionate, enthused, and energized. Her residual excitement of those opportunities, some as long ago as 20 years, animated her entire being. One such story centred on a graduate course she took while working on her master's. Three of her colleagues, who had developed similar interests through conversation, decided to take the course with her even though they were not completing their own master's programme. This supportive network blossomed when they were given the opportunity, by their administrator, to present at a staff meeting after which other teachers in the building supported the process by allowing access to students during class time and reinforcing the project (conflict resolution through classroom meetings) with the students on the playground. Ms. C spoke frequently of the momentum created when other teachers came on board and began implementing these new practices in their rooms. Working with like minded teachers who act as support, especially as a sounding board when things aren't going well was a highlight of Ms. C's anecdote.

If there was any overriding theme to the interview it was the essential nature of the school leaders' role in supporting teacher learning. For Ms. C, that support needs to look like school leaders actively processing and developing an understanding of the teacher's interest through insightful and guiding questions in order to provide access to resources (especially time to meet) and link to others working along the same vein. When recounting a positive and supported learning experience, Ms. C described her belief that the administration would have done everything possible to meet their needs. Ms. C's

ardent description of her positive experiences serves to underscore the need for actively supporting teacher learning.

However, the true power and importance of supporting teacher learning became painfully clear when Ms. C was asked to describe a situation where she did not feel supported. She recounted a situation where she approached her administrator to cover her class so she could join another grade's team meeting and their discussion on assessment. This is an area in which she has a keen interest and identified such as a major goal of her professional growth plan. With the value Ms. C places on working with like minded colleagues, an opportunity to engage with other teachers on this issue was very important but no one else on her grade level team was interested.

Her frustration resulting from her administrator's response was described through tears. The administrator said she was too busy with paperwork and wasn't able to accommodate Ms. C's needs. This vice-principal then went on to suggest Ms. C approach a colleague who might be willing to give up a prep and offer to pay her back. Knowing how valuable preps are, Ms. C was reluctant to burden a colleague with such a request but did so in order to participate in a conversation she felt important to her professional learning. For Ms. C, this situation destroyed the trust she had in her administrator, a crucial element in any relationship. She compared the outcome to a classroom and how the effect of a careless or offside comment can linger, fester, and destroy a student. We need to be as cognizant of the affect of our words and actions on our peers as we are with our students.

Telling this story opened a floodgate of suggestions of what school leaders could and should do to support teachers. According to Ms. C, school leaders need to initiate

physical facility changes that allow opportunities for teachers to come together and share ideas and successes. They need to empower teachers through positive feedback and encourage teachers to assume leadership roles in the building. Leaders need to identify and publicly praise the good that is happening in classrooms while informing teachers about up and coming ideas and issues. For Ms. C, this process, based on positive interactions, plants the seeds for success and allows them to germinate. It is equally important to Ms. C that school administrators allow teachers to try new things and remain supportive throughout the occasionally messy process. They should not assume that an off day or an idea that doesn't run as smoothly as it should is cause for concern with regards to classroom management skills. In her response, Ms. C reinforced the need to respect professional obligations and the professional code of conduct. Celebrating success, celebrating teacher learning was also an important supportive strategy that Ms. C feels is often overlooked.

In terms of engaging teachers in their learning process, Ms. C described several strategies she would like to see school leaders employ. She feels, and mentions that current research supports her on this, that a multi-targeted approach to professional learning recognizes individual needs but is not as effective as everybody shooting towards the same target. Further to this, Ms. C explained that top-down initiatives are not as successful as those that come from the grass roots. District and school administrators can promote new ideas but teachers need to be on board first. Without teachers on board infighting, dissention, anger, and actively working at cross purposes ensue. Further to that, Ms. C feels that jumping on the latest bandwagon can often serve to disenfranchise teachers by potentially implying that their current practice is wrong. Instead, Ms. C

suggests that school leaders need to find avenues that allow teachers to come to their own understanding. Allow them to grow slowly comfortable with new ideas and take ownership. Ms. C also recognizes that it is difficult to engage everyone. She proposed dissenters be allowed to close their doors and do their thing. Let them stay in their comfort zone while encouraging mentorship among colleagues who already share a trusting and supportive relationship, allowing both parties to grow.

Mr. D

Mr. D currently teaches grade eight and is pursuing his Master of Education degree. During his fifteen years as a classroom teacher he's taught all subject areas in grades 7 to 12. Although this is his first year teaching in a middle school he taught this age group before the grade reconfiguration. Many of the succinct examples he used to illustrate his points are from other environments but their validity to the middle school context remains strong.

During the interview, Mr. D's specific area of interest was readily apparent. In Mr. D's case, his passion lies with developing networks that allow students and teachers to see beyond the walls of a classroom. Whether it is accessing community members with expertise in curricular areas and inviting them into the school or better yet, taking students out of school to experience their world in more authentic way, Mr. D feels we are wasting precious opportunities by narrowing the students' focus of study to what teachers and textbooks alone can teach.

Mr. D strongly believes that the individual comes first and that professional learning needs to be self-directed. Because of his unique area of interest, he finds it somewhat difficult to develop supportive learning networks with many of his colleagues,

especially within the confines of a single school. Instead he looks beyond the school system and develops his own networks to fulfill his professional learning needs. He seeks experts that provide multiple perspectives to whatever question he is trying to answer and then takes their information and applies it until it becomes a living thing. Mr. D explains that this process takes his learning beyond where he or any of his mentors thought it would go; certainly beyond the limited benefits of a one-hour workshop. Creating opportunities to build links between people of his network is another aspect of his process Mr. D feels important as it encourages conversation. Because of the lack of opportunities for professional conversations with colleagues in his building on topics of particular interest to him, the conversations with and between members of his network are very important. Mr. D pointed out that many of these conversations are between people across North America and beyond. He explained that with today's technology, professional conversations aren't limited to who you meet up with during the day or who attends which professional development activity. Through virtual networks, the conversations have moved beyond inter-classroom, beyond inter-school. They are international.

According to Mr. D, there are several strategies that he finds supportive of his learning. He appreciates being offered opportunities to present; to share his learning with others. He told of an opportunity where he was asked to present at a national conference in Atlantic Canada. He was very appreciative of the support he received from his administration and the school district when they allowed him to take a week away from his classroom at no loss of pay. This type of support answered his need that educational leaders provide resources such as time and money but it is just as important to him that they lead by example and demonstrate their commitment through their own learning.

Another unique aspect to Mr. D's interview was his stance on the individual versus the whole. While the other participants envisioned a system of strategies that balance individual needs with the needs of the whole staff, Mr. D was clear that in terms of professional learning, the individual comes first. According to him, educational leaders need to know each staff member's interests and specialties. By doing so, leaders can capitalize on their unique opportunity to promote networking through illuminating links their global perspective makes visible that might otherwise go unnoticed. He feels administrators, in their role as educational leaders, need to push people out of their daily routines.

Mr. D described feeling supported when his leader encouraged teachers-as-leaders and facilitated the initiative, even when it results in an individual pursuing a path different to the one leading to the "common goal and vision". The conversation needs to happen on a regular basis and needs to be focused on creating opportunities, not questioning an individual's professionalism as Mr. D described feeling in some of his professional growth plan meetings. The conversation, he said, needs to be authentic and not a mandated meeting to rubber stamp a growth plan and tick off a to-do box. He explained that professional development needs to be personally motivated otherwise it falls into the more mundane category of teacher training. Mr. D suggests that if, during a school PD day, a teacher has legitimate reason to not attend because of a more appropriate learning opportunity elsewhere, they should be encouraged to do so. The key, in his opinion, for teacher learning to be optimized is when teachers have freedom and flexibility with accountability and trust.

When asked to describe a situation where he did not feel supported, Mr. D recounted a situation where he brought forward a viable, innovative, and financially self-maintaining professional development initiative and was immediately shut down. He said the process of having his considerable efforts dismissed without due consideration was extremely disappointing, especially when the idea had been developed from the grassroots, from teachers and educational leaders in school. He is frustrated in the number opportunities that are missed because ideas are not fully explored. Conversely to Ms. C, being shut down only served to motivate Mr. D to find other avenues through which to bring his ideas to fruition. He had hoped to work in partnership with his school district because he recognizes the huge benefit such a program would have for teachers and students, especially when private sector dollars had already been committed to the project, but Mr. D isn't one to take no for an answer. He is currently in negotiations with the private sector to establish a fully funded professional development consortium for teachers to help them integrate environmental education with the mandated curriculum; a process that may see him leave the classroom altogether.

Mr. E

When asked to describe how he approaches his own professional learning, Mr. E, who has 20 years of experience working with young adolescents and a specialization in special education, explained that the evolution of a teacher requires continual development to keep up with the ever increasing demands and responsibilities. He reflected on his responsibilities as a teacher when he first began his career compared with today. The most significant changes he's noticed are the social and emotional issues now

present in the classroom that teachers really didn't have to deal with ten years ago; issues he feels are going to become more challenging as the years go by.

For Mr. E, a key strategy to overcome these challenges is to keep an open mind when working to meet the complex educational and social needs of students. To do this he asks a lot of questions. He questions colleagues, the educational leaders of his school, and of the district to get their feedback. Then he synthesises and applies what he's learned to the particular needs of his students.

Throughout this process Mr. E described how powerful support from leadership can be when it takes the form of faith and trust displayed publicly, especially in times of struggle. Mr. E told a story of his first year teaching when he was given an especially challenging group of students, a new programme, but no classroom or desks. The vice principal said that he had complete confidence in Mr. E's ability to make the situation a success. The power behind this statement came from the fact that it was said in front of the students and was backed up in its repetition to other teachers and parents. Mr. E was encouraged to take risks, to try new things and if there were stumbles, the message from the leadership remained constant: we have confidence in your abilities. "If you need help, we'll get it for you." According to Mr. E, this, more than anything, allowed him, and his students, to find success in an extremely challenging situation. It allowed them to start off on a positive step. The momentum was further capitalized by the leadership's strong commitment to sharing the long term vision for the school with teachers and parents who wanted to follow a different direction. This gave Mr. E what he needed to push through difficulties until the programme's success began to speak for itself.

The flip side of this story provides the background to when Mr. E felt the least supported. He described a situation where he was making a presentation to his staff about new procedures teachers would have to adopt in order to complete the students' individual programme plans. This direction came from the board and it was Mr. E's responsibility to explain what needed to happen. During the presentation a teacher stood up and defiantly expressed his refusal comply with the new system. According to Mr. E, the administration sat there and did nothing. As strong as a publicly made statement of support can be, the leadership's public lack of response to this unprofessional situation spoke even louder. It gave permission for that type of defiance and condoned behaviour that diverts the focus of the staff from the actions necessary to achieve the common goals, not to mention disempowering Mr. E in front of his colleagues. Mr. E went on to describe his frustration and the ensuing issues created among the staff. Stemming from this story, Mr. E explained his belief in the importance of leaders demanding professionalism at all times from everyone. They need to speak up against bullies who act in an unprofessional manner using established policy and procedure. Based on the emphasis given to this story, it was apparent that appropriate and effective ways of dealing with negative people is important to Mr. E. His main concerns centered on changing ways of thinking so that negativity doesn't become contagious and infect the staff.

Further to this, Mr. E described other strategies he'd like to see enacted by educational leaders to support teacher learning. He would like to see leaders continually touch base with their staff, in a more individualized way, on the progress being made toward commonly established goals. He identified TPGPs as an effective tool because they provide focus and accountability. And, he would like the opportunity to meet with

leaders more frequently to discuss progress and issues, get support, and to bring others together. He believes the initial TPGP meeting should be a more open conversation allowing greater give and take of ideas instead of a simple exchange of information. Mr. E also feels it is important that administrators know their staff. They need to be able to identify strengths and acknowledge and address areas to be improved. To do this, it is crucial to improve lines of communication that facilitate mentoring between staff and minimize isolation. Improved communication would also help ensure follow through so that initiatives don't fall by the wayside; an issue Mr. E mentioned a couple of times during the interview. One way Mr. E would like to see this happen is by providing opportunities at staff meetings for individuals to share what they have tried in their classrooms and what professional development activities they've been to. This would allow new ideas to be placed on the table. However, Mr. E also recognized the need to balance the opportunity to share with the responsibility to listen. He points out that the squeaky wheel shouldn't be allowed to drive the direction of the conversation. He feels that it is the role and responsibility of leaders to determine the interest of the whole and ensure a variety of voices are heard, even if it means speaking on behalf of others.

Mr. E's disappointment and frustration with practices that hinder a school from reaching its potential to help kids resonated clearly through in his soft-spoken but confident eloquence. His personal dedication to advocate for what is best for kids is supported by his efforts to make a difference for the students in his class while diligently working from behind the scenes to improve the status quo.

Mrs. F

Despite being a newer teacher, Mrs. F has the most experience in a middle school setting of all the interview participants. She has taught foods and sewing along with a variety of others subjects to grades 6, 7 and 8 for five years although only the past three have been full time. As with many new teachers, Mrs. F's teaching career had a tenuous beginning with a long line of temporary contracts strung together before a probationary contract lead to her current continuing position. Among a couple of other concerns, this constant state of flux was one issue highlighted during her interview. For the most part though, Mrs. F said she has been fortunate to feel very supported in her learning right from the beginning of her career.

As all the other participants have pointed out, Mrs. F also described her professional learning as an on-going process. She explained that because of her specialization in CTS there are not many formal professional development activities she can attend. Instead, she says that most of her professional learning comes from trial and error of ideas she picks up during conversations with teachers and tweaks to make her own. When challenged, Mrs. F seeks out more experienced colleagues to vent, bounce around ideas, ask for advice, and get validation that she is doing the right thing.

For Mrs. F, the teachers' professional growth plan is a tool she uses to fulfill the mandated task of outlining her goals but she does not feel it supports her learning. Rather she describes feeling constrained by its rigid guidelines. She explained that in her school, she is directed to write specifically directed goals that fall in line with school district objectives even if they do not coincide with the direction she would like to pursue. She often finds the need to manipulate the school directed goals in order to incorporate

personal initiatives she feels will have a direct and positive impact on kids. She acknowledged that common vision and goals are important but stressed that they shouldn't be so rigid as to necessitate teachers finagling their personal goals, for which they likely feel greater commitment and ownership, to fit pre-established criteria. It was with pride that she told of the major project she's initiated that provides nutritious breakfast items at cost to students and fulfills her passion for helping kids make healthier choices. However, despite the extra hours of work she's put into her Cantina and the benefit it brings to the students, it is not part of her TPGP because it doesn't fit any of the areas she was supposed to fill out. The result being the TPGP becomes nothing more than a required document that gets tucked in a file until the year end meeting when it's reviewed with administration. In no way does it become a working document supportive of the author taking ownership of plan, as is its supposed intention.

Mrs. F had many examples she used to describe situations when she felt supported in her learning. She described situations where she would approach her administration with an initiative and the feedback would be to go for it. Further to that, her administration would advocate for her idea with other staff members and bring them on board. She shared a specific example of a program she designed for the school's advisor classes. She presented her proposal to the leadership who took it to the grade level teams. She soon received emails from most of the staff asking to be a part of her programme. Mrs. F described how encouraged and empowered this made her feel.

She appreciates periodic checks to make sure everything is going well and the established culture that promotes discussion which encourages better understanding as well as opportunities to effect change when frustrating situations arise. Mrs. F used

another situation to illustrate her point. She approached the school's leadership team after being repeatedly frustrated by the lack of consistency when students were sent to the office. After listening to her concerns the administration developed a student tracking system to address the issue. Mrs. F described feeling validated and empowered through the process of having her concerns heard and then seeing action taken to improve the situation. Although the example does not tie directly to her professional learning she explained that having this type of support readily available promotes confidence that whatever the context, support will be provided. She said it also serves to develop an understanding that when problems arise, the educational leaders of her building are willing to dig deeper to ensure the issues aren't systemic as opposed to reacting to the immediate situation. She knows they will get to the root of the problem and not just apply a band-aid solution on the resulting consequence. This confidence gives her the freedom to take risks and let her voice be heard as she feels necessary.

Another specific example Mrs. F used to describe her feeling of being supported extended beyond her building to include the superintendent of the district. She took it upon herself to email the superintendent regarding a focus group she was trying to put together that she thought would coincide with guidelines the district would be implementing. His response was swift, encouraging, and full of helpful suggestions. Added to that, he initiated links to others in the district he knew shared her interest. Mrs. F described the experience as wonderful. She felt so empowered and validated; highly motivated to continue along the path of personally directed professional learning.

According to Mrs. F, support of professional learning should provide scaffolding designed to support individual needs. Too much freedom resulting from not enough

support results in floundering. She sees scaffolding taking the form of providing as much information as possible so that everyone can make informed decisions without imposed direction. For Mrs. F, it all came down to choice. When presented with new initiatives, she feels that well informed choices are very important so that teachers don't become overburdened with programmes and pilot projects for which they had no part initiating. But, as Mrs. F pointed out, teachers often think they can add just one more thing to their plate. Scaffold support also means helping teachers take care of themselves when they choose to take on too much or to say no to everything. Mrs. F would like educational leaders to help teachers learn to say no while at the same time help others learn to say yes; guide all teachers to find a balance.

Choice is equally important during potentially negative situations. Mrs. F told a story where her methods were being questioned by a parent. Although she acknowledged that one of the roles of the school leader is to act as a buffer between a teacher and harmful interruptions, she feels that teachers should always be apprised of situations pertaining to them and be given options as to how to respond. She went on to describe her increasing frustration when she was kept out of the loop in regards to a parent who was challenging her professionalism. She described feeling more and more disempowered as the situation escalated. Mrs. F said she understands the final result of having a student transferred from her class was probably for the best. However, she often wonders she had been given the choice to be more involved, if there may have been other options available that might have prevented some of the resulting hard feelings.

Mrs. F concluding statements centered on the need for grassroots initiatives developed by teachers and for a balance between professional learning support strategies

that meet common goals and individuals' needs. She understands that some things have to be top down but feels these types of initiatives need to be brought forth slowly so that teachers can come on board and assume ownership. She described her need to understand the philosophy driving any changes so she can envision how it will affect her practice.

Mr. G

Mr. G graduated with his Bachelor of Education a year ago and according to Teacher qualification services is a first-year teacher. However, he actually has five years of teaching experience under a letter of authority with a private school. This unique background gave Mr. G an interesting perspective from which to respond to the questions and prompts of the interview.

For Mr. G, his motivation to pursue professional learning stems from his need to lead by example. He strongly believes that if you are going to be an effective teacher you have to keep learning. The fact that learning is an on-going process he expects to work at for the rest of his career was a theme of our dialogue. An echoing theme was his frustration with colleagues who do not actively engage in professional learning and leaders who are not effective in supporting the process.

Mr. G uses daily reflection on his lessons to identify how things could be improved. He examines his practice for weakness in order to set goals and then takes action for change. That action may take the form of searching on-line teacher websites, accessing local experts to bounce around questions and ideas, attending formal professional development sessions, and staying current through professional reading. Of these, the strategy he finds the most beneficial is brainstorming with colleagues and educational leaders. He especially appreciates the open door policy of his administrators

who encourage teachers to come in and talk about what's going on in their classroom. Mr. G said that although they might not always have an answer, they can always point him towards a good solution.

On numerous occasions throughout the interview, Mr. G described how appreciative he was of leaders who are able to "make things work out so that teachers can take advantage of learning opportunities". An example he gave to illustrate this point occurred this spring. His administration forwards any professional development related emails to teaching staff. One such email mentioned an opportunity for an intensive four week course on English as a Second Language at the local college. Mr. G jumped at the chance knowing that he is challenged by his ESL teaching responsibilities. In order to make it work, his administrators quickly re-arranged his teaching schedule to provide release time and they provided significant financial support by paying for the course.

This example, although used to highlight a situation where Mr. G felt supported in his professional learning, lead to a discussion on how it could have been so much more. In this situation significant effort, time and money was invested by the school for Mr. G to take part in this learning opportunity. However, Mr. G expressed to being somewhat disappointed with the lack of accountability and follow through. At no time did his administrators come and ask him about the course. He was never asked to share what he learned with other ESL colleagues nor was there any sort of debriefing at the end of the course. At the time, Mr. G admitted, he was somewhat relieved because it meant less work but he also recognized that a great deal of the learning potential was missed because of the lack of follow through. He mentioned that he knows he could have created those opportunities to share what he learned but that as a beginning teacher, he already felt

overwhelmed by everything else he needed to do. He also felt that creating those formal opportunities to share with colleagues needs to be facilitated by the administrators in order to add an element of accountability.

His recognition of the lack of follow-through with the debriefing of the above example was further reinforced when the conversation turned to TPGPs. Mr. G described his experience of being told to complete a professional growth plan every September where “you sit down for 10 minutes with your principal and tell him or her what you want to focus on and then its forgotten about until the spring when you’re asked to account for how you fulfilled it.” Mr. G wondered if frequent questions throughout the year might encourage people to take a more active role in pursuing their goals.

As previously mentioned, one of the recurring themes in Mr. G’s responses was his frustration with teachers who “fly under the radar” and who aren’t held accountable for continually developing their practice. According to Mr. G, a good administrator is going to find a way to make “the necessary strong hint, in a nice way, to those teachers who need to be prodded” into taking ownership of their professional learning.

This skill, says Mr. G, comes from school leaders who know their staff well. They are the ones who take time to develop strong relationships with their staff so they know where the strengths and weaknesses lie. With this knowledge, educational leaders are able to exploit the strengths of the staff and share targeted opportunities with those who would benefit most. At this point the conversation circled back to the ESL opportunity. Mr. G wondered if the practice of using email to distribute information is actually as effective as the administration might think. Mr. G explained that it worked for him because he is motivated to seek out opportunities but he questions its usefulness for those

teachers who aren't intrinsically motivated to read through the plethora of generic mass emails to search out a learning opportunity. The administration may feel that they are keeping their staff informed of the opportunities available to them, but are they considering the need to use more than one medium to get out the message? As teachers, we wouldn't expect all our students to understand a lesson taught only once and in only one way and yet, as Mr. G points out, we seem to have that expectation for ourselves. By really knowing their staff, Mr. G feels that leaders can target information to those who need it most. Mr. G suggests that not only would this increase the validity of the information but also increase the priority with which the information is received.

Further to that, school leaders could follow up with individuals and determine if and how the information is being used; offering encouragement and support as necessary. As many of the other participants mentioned, Mr. G stressed how motivating such small gestures as sincerely asking how things are going are as indicators of support. By having a thorough understanding of the staff and their goals, school leaders would be able to personalize their interactions with teachers and ask pointed questions related to each teachers' professional learning and tie in links to the common goals and vision for the school. Mr. G's estimates that this process would have significant positive ramifications in a school because it would help ensure that everyone is engaged in developing better practices resulting in more positive experiences for the students.

Mr. G sees a school as a community in which you can't function as an individual without regard to how your actions affect the whole. He feels that by following through with individual professional learning you'll end up with better teachers which will help create a stronger community. The opposite also holds true, reminds Mr. G. To this end,

he emphasized the need for school leaders to balance individual learning needs against the needs of the whole while remaining focused on a common goal. The leaders need to bring people together under that common goal through, according to Mr. G, their passion and eloquence when explaining their vision to others. By being thorough in their explanation teachers can make informed decisions and become empowered to take ownership of the vision; instead of being expected to blindly follow. As a caveat to this Mr. G advocated for educational leaders to develop visions based on sound pedagogical reasoning and not a need to leave their mark, nor should changes be in reaction to a situation that hasn't been adequately investigated. Mr. G used the analogy of the squeaky wheel that gets the grease. The squeaking is probably the result of a problem that needs to be addressed but leaders can't forget about the other types of wheels: those who are currently running smoothly and need nothing more than regular preventative maintenance and those that are silent because they have ground to a halt. As described by Mr. G, effective educational leaders who supports professional learning is like a tire shop dedicated to exceptional customer service. They know how to look, and listen, to every kind of tire. Based on their direct observations, they devise and implement a service plan that maximizes the performance of the tire in order maximize the performance of the vehicle.

Interview Themes

Though stories were personal and unique, the issues at their heart repeated. During open coding, these issues developed into the broad headings used as categorical labels for subsequent stages of analysis. These categories included:

1. Personal Relationships

1.1 Importance of Communication

1.2 Knowing your Staff

1.3 Meeting with Teachers

1.4 Taking Care of Teachers

2. Professional Conversations

2.1 Creating Synergy

2.2 Empowering Teachers

2.3 Teachers Talking to Teachers

2.4 Isolation

3. Individual vs. Common Goals

3.1 Common Goals

3.2 Grass Root Initiatives

3.3 External vs. Internal Motivation

4. Removing Barriers

4.1 Providing Resources

4.2 What not do to

4.3 Stoke the Fire

4.4 Encouraging Risk Taking

5. Follow Through

5.1 Keeping Teachers on Track

5.2 Professional Responsibilities

5.3 Providing Opportunities for Debriefing

6. Traditional Professional Development

The process of the second reading, the axial coding stage, affirmed the appropriateness of the headings and began to highlight sub-themes within each major category. The selective coding stage, used to find illustrative examples and non-examples, began to add definition to each sub-theme. These categories and sub-themes were developed as a result of a qualitative correlation of the responses from each participant. Sub-themes were identified when three or more individuals shared reference to a particular idea within a given context.

At the point of data synthesis, a metaphor of a quilt took shape. Each participant was a section of the quilt and their individual stories made up each distinct square. Every square was unique and the common colours made its' placement in the quilt somewhat subjective. Common threads pulled it all together and when stepped back, the individual pieces created the big picture.

As with the subjective placement of quilt pieces, it was difficult to decide if an example or non-example gleaned from the selective coding stage should have been used illustrate one category or another because of the common elements running through each theme. In the end several factors, such as context and background, were used to decide which specific references or quotes illustrated which point. What follows are descriptive summaries of the themes and sub-themes that emerge from the aggregated data.

Personal Relationships

The categorical label of Personal Relationships emerged as the primary theme with the highest number of specific references from each of the seven participants. In almost every story told, participants returned frequently to the importance of school

leaders knowing their staff. This was clearly expressed as an essential need rather than a secondary requirement. According to participants, developing relationships with individuals allows for greater depth and breadth of understanding of what they are trying to accomplish in, and out, of their classroom. That understanding precipitates school leaders' anticipation of teachers' needs and facilitates their ability to develop necessary supports.

Since talking with teachers is at the root of each of these sub-themes, it was sometimes difficult to separate them from the subsequent category of Professional Conversation. What distinguished references in this category from those pertaining to Professional Conversation was the underlying purpose of the interaction. In the category of Professional Conversation, the dialogue and exchange of ideas are paramount while the stories used to highlight Personal Relationship relate more to the emotional need for personal interaction. Under this heading, four distinct sub-themes emerged: the need to communicate, knowing staff well enough to understand individual needs, meeting with teachers, and taking care of teachers.

Importance of communication. During the interviews, six of seven participants specifically expressed the need for communication to support their learning process. These references were fairly balanced between the need for communication in order to understand the *why* of things and, alternately, using verbal communication to give positive feedback. As Ms. F described her experience with the parent who didn't agree with her methods, her frustration of being "kept out of the loop" was apparent. In her case, it was because she wasn't given a choice of whether or not to be involved. However, once the situation was resolved, she went and spoke with her administration.

She said that “When the admin takes the time to explain why, it helps to deal with the frustration.” This helped her learn from the experience and become a more effective teacher.

When Mr. G defined a leader who is supportive of professional learning, he mentioned that a “leader I will follow is someone I’m not always going to agree with, but I can buy into what they want to do.” He went on to explain that “they would have to be thorough in their explanation...you’ve got to completely understand why they want to go that direction. They need to eloquently and passionately voice it. Give me a logical explanation as to why we’re going to do this.” Mr. G suggests that when a leader is able to effectively communicate the why of something, he is more willing to alter his vision and try something that may be out of his comfort zone.

Both Ms. C and Mr. E were strong advocates for leaders to communicate positive feedback to teachers and reflected on the positive effect that can have. Mr. E said that “when people publicly demonstrate their confidence in me through their words, I feel supported.” Ms. C encourages school leaders to “tell teachers [that] what they’re doing in their classrooms is good.” She suggests that giving teachers verbal encouragement is a doorway into professional learning because it validates what they’re doing and creates an opportunity to introduce new ideas that could enhance, not replace, their current practice. According to her, leaders need to “empower teachers through positive feedback.”

Interview responses included several other comments relating specifically to the importance of communication in building stronger relationships. Mr. B, a middle school principal, identified the need for leaders to “communicate and take action.” Mr. D mentioned that “after creating opportunities for communication”, links between people

are created while Mr. E summed it up by emphasizing the importance of “improving the lines of communication so that we can help each other in some of these things”.

Knowing your staff. The next sub-theme centered around the necessity for educational leaders to know their staff. A close enough personal relationship to ensure that needs are understood and support can be individualized is crucial. Participating leaders were the first to mention the importance of this practice. Ms. A said it most succinctly, “Every school needs to be personal.” Mr. B, the other educational leader among the participants, further elaborated this idea when he mentioned this is “where sensitivity comes in. You’ve got your priorities but you also have to understand what the staff needs are.” This specific sub-theme was common to three of the teachers interviewed. Mr. D said that “it’s really important for administration to know their staff, that they know where their interests lie and what their specialties are.” This was reinforced by Mr. E who suggested that “daily activities that support teachers’ learning need to be individualized in some areas.” Mr. E went on further to describe a personal experience where he had administrators that were very hands on and knew their staff very well. He said that it is “beneficial for everyone involved when the admin know who you have working and know what their strengths and weaknesses are because if someone has glaring weaknesses and they’re not being addressed, it makes the job that much more difficult.” Mr. G’s comments indicate his agreement. He said that “administration need to know their staff. In order to be effective, an administration *has* to understand their staff.” He identifies this as important because educational leaders “have to understand what the strengths and weaknesses are so that they can encourage their staff and help them develop their weaknesses.”

Meeting with teachers. Getting to know the staff takes place through the process of the next sub-theme: meeting with teachers. This idea was specifically mentioned by five of seven participants where the context centered on the nature of the interaction. Respondents indicated that going out and meeting with teachers with deliberate purpose is an effective strategy that supports their learning. Participants believed it is not enough to announce a blanket open door policy that invites teachers to come in and meet with school leaders; nor does dropping in on a class during the middle of a lesson allow for the depth of interaction teachers are looking for. As Ms. A said, “planned opportunities for one on one conversations with leadership to touch base on progress is a valued process.” Ms. C wants leaders to “Go and find out what is good...ask if needs are being met.” Being able to “go in and BS with either of the administrators anytime” is appreciated by Mr. G, but he also mentioned that what would help him “feel more supported is being asked how things are going; knowing what was in my TPGP well enough to ask about it.” The opportunities created, and often missed, with TPGPs were also mentioned by Mr. D who said that, “TPGPs are a good idea when you can sit down and talk with admin instead of it being simply a mandated document we have to fill out.” Mr. B offered specific advice for school leaders. He implores them to “meet with teachers; they are very open to telling you how they feel.” He wants to “seek teachers out to interact. Be there with teachers in their learning.”

Taking care of teachers. The final sub-theme to come under the personal relationships category was that of taking care of teachers so they feel better positioned to engage in professional learning. The most passionate voice on this topic belonged to Ms. F, although she admits she doesn't know how school leaders would do it. It came across

as quite important to her that an “administrator makes sure people aren’t overextending themselves.” She wants administration to “make them aware of everything they’re doing and suggest ways to lighten the load then encourage those who aren’t as involved to pick up some of the slack.” For Mr. E, taking care of teachers looks like his administration providing that previously mentioned positive verbal feedback that allowed him and his class to get off on the right foot. Having the opportunity to go and BS with his administrators supports Mr. G’s learning. He knows that “they may not have the answers but they’re definitely always going to point in a good direction on how to overcome the challenge you’re facing.”

Professional Conversations

Closely linked to the Personal Relationships category is the second major emerging theme of Professional Conversation. Teachers are social creatures who spend their days talking with students. However, participants frequently suggested that finding time to hold meaningful conversations with colleagues is extremely difficult. The rarity of these opportunities significantly increases their value. Finding time to talk with colleagues came up repeatedly as pivotal to professional learning.

Creating synergy. Of most importance was the belief that synergy is created when teachers get together to talk about their ideas. The results of those conversations are always richer than if a teacher struggles with an idea independently. In fact, six of seven participants made specific reference to how teachers talking to teachers generates momentum. It allows ideas to be explored in greater depth through the diversity of paradigms. Mrs. C was most adamant that working with her colleagues allows her to develop professionally in ways she never could on her own. She explained that “it’s a lot

easier, a lot more successful and beneficial if I can talk to another colleague of whatever standing and get support, materials, advice...much more successful.” A little later in the interview she expanded this idea by saying that “through conversations with peers you develop an appreciation for their teaching style and the interests which creates opportunities to find likeminded individuals who might be interested in sharing learning opportunities.” She summed it up well when she said “I find it so much more rewarding and I function so much better when I work with others.”

Mr. B’s comments extend the importance of synergy. He spoke of his commitment to providing teachers opportunities to talk by facilitating conversations during staff meetings. He feels that “50 brains thinking on an issue [are] a lot better than one or two. You get a hybrid through this inclusive model.” Mr. E seemed to agree with this process when he expressed the concern that “right now we’re 35 individuals and I think there’s opportunity where things can be done in small groups...depending on what the growth issue that people are looking at.”

The perspectives of both Mr. E and Mr. D point out that bringing teachers together contributes to an exponential increase in expertise. Mr. D suggests that perhaps a database should be established within the district that would give people access to each other. He is concerned that “we have so many teachers in our district with so many talents that nobody knows about. We’re not able to draw on their expertise.” Mr. E would like to the mentoring programme stepped up a notch by setting “up a peer tutoring type of set up where each of us help and benefit from each other.”

Empowering teachers. During the interviews it became apparent that the participants’ belief in the empowerment of teachers engaging in professional

conversations was a direct result of their experience. Most of them gave specific, fervour infused examples to highlight this essential practice. Mr. B described a December staff meeting in which he first tried putting professional conversation on the agenda. He explained how it “created such energy as could light up the room. It was amazing and empowering.” For Mrs. A, “working together with a colleague who is interested in pursuing the same path is one of the most powerful things on that whole learning curve.” Having administrators provide these opportunities was most appreciated by Mrs. C. She referred to the support she received after being given the opportunity to talk to her colleagues at a staff meeting about her project. She asked, “What is more fulfilling than a colleague coming up to you and saying that she is going to implement your initiative in her classroom because she can see how effective it’s being?” Ms. F shared a similar experience when her administrator went and talked to the grade level teams about a learning plan that needed the cooperation of other teachers. She described the result. “Everyone jumped on board to support what I wanted to learn and using their kids to do it, which was cool.” Finding colleagues with whom to share professional conversations is difficult for Mr. D because of his unique area of interest so he looks “on-line to an electronic network of people all over North America.” He explained that “whether we’re communicating as a collective group or just little emails that...give us an opportunity to talk and discuss stuff and to me, that’s the most supportive network I have.”

Teachers talking to teachers. When participants were asked how they approached their professional learning almost every one mentioned talking with colleagues. Talking to each other as a problem solving strategy ranked high among preferred learning techniques in which ideas are often gathered during casual conversations. This is the case

for Ms. F, who described her process as trying something someone said worked for them and tweaking it to make it her own. She explained that she will often go to someone more experienced and ask for advice or a sounding board.

Mr. E follows a similar process. When working towards achieving his learning goals he “asks lots of questions.” He likes to “touch base with, whether it’s administrators or school board office people to get their idea, to get their feedback, to get their direction and then try and form it to meet the needs of the students” he has in his class.” Likewise, Mr. G described his professional learning as “turning to a colleague and saying how do you deal with this? Or, turning to a few colleagues at different times and saying how do you deal with this?”

According to Ms. F, just being able to talk it through with a colleague helps her better understand what the problem really is. The support derived through conversation was also important to Ms. C who said “you have to have somebody to bounce ideas off of, to talk to when you’re feeling low about something that just doesn’t seem to be working.”

Isolation. The last sub-theme to come under this heading is isolation. However, many participants’ stories serve as non-examples as they describe situations where participants experienced a lack of professional conversation. The negative effects of not being able to talk with colleagues about professional concerns was important enough for four of the seven participants to mention it specifically. Ms. C articulated that “working in isolation doesn’t work.” Mr. E’s summary delved a little deeper. He touched on the emotional and potentially physical consequences of not working together. “We’re far too isolated,” he said, “and people feel frustrated and they get sick.” He believes that the

overall climate of a staff is negatively affected by “how individualized we are at times.” As a solution he suggested a “simple discussion period at staff meetings, having people share ideas on different directions” as something that can be put in place to help rectify these situations and support student learning. Mr. B strongly emphasized the need to create opportunities for teacher talk. He advocated that “it is absolutely critical that teachers have time to work together.” He went on to suggest that “ambush of email” along with how busy teachers have become have overshadowed professional dialogue.

Individual vs. Common Goals

Year plans, lesson plans, professional growth plans – teachers are planners who regularly to outline what needs to be accomplished and strategies for implementation. It follows then that goals were an important theme to the stories relating how participants of this project reach their professional learning goals.

Common goals. In terms of supporting professional learning, the coding process highlighted both examples and non-examples of the influence of common goals. “There is power behind a team when they are guided by a common goal,” said Ms. A. She suggests that “when there is a common goal, everything is so much easier because everything is directed towards it.” Ms. C would agree. She said that “it is so much better if everybody is on the same side, if everybody works together.” This point was also reinforced by Mr. G who brought it back to the students. According to him “individuals out on their own just doesn’t work.” Mr. G was concerned that, “it creates a certain amount of disjointedness among staff that is just not good for a school and at some point it’s always going to trickle down to your students.” He sets up the metaphor that “you can’t be an island if you’re going to be successful, school is a community. You can’t have

a school where there [are] four different visions going on and everyone's going off on their own tangent.”

Grass root initiatives. Although there were several specific references to the influence of an established common goal, comments pertaining to the importance of a goals' origins were even more frequent. The differentiation and balance between grass root and leader driven initiatives was important enough to mention for all but one of the participants. Of the two types of initiatives, grassroots were clearly identified as the more powerful. Mr. B explained that, as it applies to learning, it is “the grassroots stuff” that engages teachers. “Professional development needs to come from within the building,” he continued. He further emphasized his point by explaining that “you never want top down. It was a complete disaster in a building where there was top down professional development because people didn't want to do it.” Ms. C agreed. She described “top down” as a “negative term in professional development.” For her, “it has to come from the grassroots. It has to come from the teacher in the classroom.” Mr. D reinforced this perspective when he said that “grass root initiatives are a powerful and motivating change factor. They need to be acknowledged and pursued, even if they may not jive with the big picture of the administration.” He gave the example of “somebody at the district or somebody at the administrative level saying we're going to do learning communities and bring in a guest speaker at talk about learning communities. I'd prefer not to do that because that may not be where I'm at.” Although the importance of grass root goals was clearly established through interviews, it was balanced by the understanding that at a certain point, these goals often need strong leadership to provide an external locus of motivation.

External vs internal motivation. As Mr. B put it, “people need to reach out and want it”, and it’s often up to educational leaders to help them understand why. This sometimes results in people compromising their individual goals for the good of the whole. Ms. F described such a situation at her school. She explained that each of her learning goals had to coincide with the goals of her school. Therefore, one of them is based on the school’s AISI project; not because it was something she was interested in but “it’s something we decided as a school to do because we were kind of told we should. We see why we should but it wasn’t a teacher driven thing.” It was clear through her tone that she agreed to the commitment but it did not energize nor empower her to the extent of her individually established goals, which aren’t actually in her TPGP because they don’t fit the mandate. This is where the ability of educational leaders to bring people on board is so critical. As Mr. G said “I will follow a leader I’m not always going to agree with but I can buy into what they want to do. I couldn’t follow one that was kind of letting us all go in our own direction because, for me, that is a lack of direction. It falls apart.” Educational leaders are the catalyst for bringing a staff together behind a grassroots initiative so that each individual assumes ownership of the goal. The staff need to feel they were integral to its inception and vital to its success. As Ms. C said “unless teachers buy into it, unless teachers are supported and unless that willingness comes from the teachers, it is a disaster.”

However, that doesn’t mean teachers should compromise their personal goals for the good of the whole. As Ms. A explained “everyone can be working on a school goal and there still be flexibility for individual or team things.” When asked if a school’s professional development plan should focus on meeting the needs of the whole or of the

individual, all participants agreed a balance must be struck between the two. Ms. C suggests that it is not “necessary to align personal goals with those of the school, district, province and professional organization but use them to help inform their development.” Extending the idea of building on people’s interests and strengths, Mr. D suggests that “if we talk about differentiated learning for students, it’s no different for adults.”

Removing Barriers

The next categorical label emerged from the participants’ response to what educational leaders do, or could do, to best support professional learning. It boiled down to Removing Barriers to make it happen.

Providing resources. All the participants agreed with Ms. C who said that “leadership is seen as a resource with access to materials, experience, understanding and the means to facilitate networking to assist professional learning.” However, most participants were more specific. Mr. B highlighted time as the most valuable resource a school leader could provide. He suggests such strategies as “making necessary changes to the timetables and calendars to seize opportunities.” He reinforced the previously discussed sub-theme of professional dialogue by saying that “if you really want teachers to have professional interaction, you better give ‘em time to do it.” This was also mentioned by Ms. A. She said that “putting structures, such as timetabling common planning time, in place allows consensus to build on what needs to be done.”

Time, money and information were the three key resources the teachers mentioned as effective in supporting professional learning. Mr. D described how supported he felt when his administration facilitated his attendance at a week long national conference on the East coast with no loss of pay; a financial and time

commitment well beyond the established limits of both the professional development fund guidelines and the teachers' collective agreement. Ms. C described situations in her school where her administration said to her "whatever you want, you do it. If you have any problems come ask for help. If you want resources, we've got some money we can spend on that." She said that when substitute teachers are in the school, "any preps in their schedule are farmed out to teachers currently heavily involved in extra-curricular activities to help balance the load." She did question, however, how school leaders could better "prevent the imbalance to begin with." Mr. G appreciates how his educational leaders act as a conduit of information about learning opportunities. He believes "it's in the best interest of the leaders to give their staff the tools they need" to make choices concerning their learning. He suggests they can also "provide extra money, take care of booking a sub if need be, that kind of thing." But of all the responses, perhaps Ms. C said it best. She emphasized that "everybody has the right to receive support, whatever it is: physical, mental, emotional, financial, whatever."

What not to do. As is often the case when trying to define what something is, examples are given as to what it is *not*. In trying to define what school leaders should do to support professional learning, many participants described what shouldn't be done. As illustrated in the case-by-case summaries, many of the participants were particularly passionate in their discussion of these issues. An example was Ms. C's vehement description of her experience when she was refused the support of her grade level leader. For her "it destroyed professional development, teacher growth and teacher leadership." She suggests that an administrator has the responsibility to "make it happen." Mr. G spoke of situations he's aware of where "many people are intimidated, either they're

afraid to broach the subject or they've tried and they've been shut down." From an administrator's perspective, Mr. B recognizes the same needs. He said that "a key is having administrators who are open for teachers to try as many professional opportunities as they can and not put up barriers or make them feel guilty about the time that it takes from the classroom." He feels it is important to "encourage growth through the removal of barriers, don't put up road blocks."

Stoke the fire. Another sub-theme in this category was initially brought up by Mr. D and then subsequently by a several others. Mr. D thinks that "administration's a key part to stoke the fire or ignite the fire at least." It's up to educational leaders to stoke the flames of professional growth, often by dealing with the dampening affects of negativity. He suggest that one of the best ways for educational leaders to make it happen is to give "teachers freedom to search it out". Ms. C appeals for leaders to "deal with negativity appropriately, professionally" because "one person can make it an absolutely horrible experience, turn you off, and make you feel inadequate." Mr. E made a similar suggestion. He said that "when faced with direct and inappropriate challenges from other staff, the admin needs to deal with it immediately, directly and appropriately; not just sit there and to nothing." He went further to say that "administrators need to address some of the glass half empty people, help them change their way of thinking because sometimes their way of thinking can become contagious and negatively affect staff." Coming back to the idea of stoking the flames, Ms. A suggests that it is the role of the school leader to offer "verbal support when things aren't going well." She sees one of their roles as giving teachers "encouragement to persevere."

Encourage risk taking. Allowing teachers to take risks in their learning and their practice also came up several times as ways educational leaders can support professional learning. Mr. E said “give me the freedom to try different things, even if there are stumbles or if things don’t go well.” “Teachers need to be allowed to go and learn” was the advice given by Ms. A. According to Mr. D “it was a supportive environment when I worked with administrators who were all for the fact that teachers are leaders in the school.” He suggests that this empowered teachers to try new things. “I never heard a no.”

Follow Through

Many of the sub-themes discussed under the category of Removing Barriers centered on creating opportunities and making things happen so that teachers can achieve their goals. Follow Through was almost equally important to the participants. For all participants, the process of taking time to reflect on the learning process, celebrate success, and plan for further development was one where the active support of their educational leaders was very important.

Keeping teachers on track. Providing opportunities to reflect on what has been accomplished is an element that came through the data. Mr. E’s comments that “it’s really important that there are regular updates on school based goals and visions. A better job needs to be done of just ensuring we are on the path we said we were going to be on” suggests the need for opportunities for active reflection. He later zeroed in on his frustration. He commented that “the thing that has bugged me the most is when we’ve set up some of these goals is that there is no follow through.” According to the statements made during the interviews, teachers want someone to check up with them and see how

they're doing on a regular basis. Having educational leaders ask targeted questions concerning progress in learning goals came up in every interview as a strategy that supported their learning. Ms. F mentioned how much she appreciated her administrators "coming in to check that everything was ok" or if she needed anything. She also suggested they "ask questions to which she needs to know the answers to help her clarify what she doesn't know." Mr. E indicated that "there needs to be a quarterly meeting with administrators to help keep [him] on track and to see if there is anything they can do to support the process." Follow Through for Ms. A looks like "having others ask me about my goals, people to whom I'm accountable, it keeps me on track." As one non-example, Mr. G's comments indicate his frustration at the current lack of follow through. He described his experience with how "we're all told at the beginning of the year that we have to come up with a professional growth plan but then it's almost as if it gets forgotten about until spring when we're asked to account for how we fulfilled it. But where are the questions throughout the year?" He further emphasized his point by saying "there's this big emphasis in September and then you have your meeting and it's done, and then it's almost like nothing happens."

Professional responsibility. Another aspect of follow through that came up in four of the seven interviews was professional responsibility. This sub-theme, however, came from two different perspectives. Ms. A, Mr. B, and Ms. D all discussed professional responsibility and follow through from the perspective of teachers' understanding that professional learning is one of their responsibilities and, as such, they need to find ways to follow through with growth plans. In each case, they mentioned their plan as one tool they use to help with this. Ms. A said that "when I write it down, I'm accountable for

them.” For Ms. F, her “TPGP helps me follow through on what I’ve been told to do.” As for Mr. B, he emphasized that “teachers need to understand professional development is part of your professional growth. For teachers who haven’t fully developed that understanding, fall back on their growth plan and make suggestions that guide them to make good on their professional learning.”

Mr. D took a slightly different point of view, suggesting that acknowledging his responsibility to engage in continuing education provides the necessary level of accountability. He stated that:

I think accountability as a professional would mean I don’t need to be justifying what I’m doing for PD so they can rubber stamp my plan, but that I understand what I need to get it done. Let there be mutual respect that we’re both doing what needs to be done. Let there be conversations about what my plan entails and how I’m going about it.

For Mr. D, a ten minute meeting to present his growth plan to his administration in no way supports his professional growth. For him a conversation centered on respect and a mutual understanding of his goals would be much more conducive to his learning.

Providing opportunities for debriefing. Equally important to professional responsibility was the idea of debriefing and sharing about learning experiences with peers. Of the seven participants, 4 mentioned debriefing in some capacity. The most illustrative example was provided by Mr. G when he talked about the professional development opportunity that required the school to make a significant investment of resources, including rearranging time tables and paying for courses. Upon reflection of that opportunity, Mr. G stated that:

Once the course was finished I never got asked about it again. I have a stack of stuff still sitting there in my office. It probably would have been better for me to have a date given and know I was expected to present a summary of the course to others teaching ESL. I probably would have had

more to do with it. It probably wasn't followed up with the way it should have been.

When participants were asked to expand their ideas of follow through they provided several suggestions, many of which were quite similar. Mr. G, Mr. B, Ms. C, and Ms. A all suggested that providing and offering opportunities to share learning with others, especially during staff meetings, is a positive strategy that will not only help solidify and celebrate learning but, according to Mr. G, "might kick start something for someone else."

Traditional Professional Development

In terms of frequency of participant references, the final categorical heading of Traditional Professional Development rated very low. However, traditional professional development strategies continue to provide teachers and administrators with avenues through which to pursue their professional learning goals. Specifically, four of the seven identified workshops and the Southern Alberta Professional Development Consortium as strategies they use to meet their learning goals. Accessing professional literature and attending specialist council or other major and often international conferences each warranted three references. When asked how they approach their own professional learning most participants mentioned their teacher professional growth plans yet, they were more often than not seen as a compulsory process as opposed to an effective learning tool. However, many also suggested that there was much greater potential for teachers' growth plans to become a living document used to guide the learning process if significant changes could be made to their implementation and follow through.

Discussion

While exploring the literature base to ascertain current research trends in how educational leaders can best support the professional learning of teachers, an outline of guiding themes emerged that were reinforced during the interview process. The case-by-case and thematic summaries of the interviews highlighted certain umbrella concepts that lent themselves to be compared and contrasted to those from the literature review. These umbrella concepts will be the topics that constitute the discussion section:

1. Effective Leadership
2. Professional Learning
3. Middle School

Effective Leadership

Leithwood and Jantzi (1997) expanded Lord and Maher's (1993) research to suggest that certain behaviours by those in positions of authority are necessary to create acceptance of their leadership. The results of this study support that contention with a slight variation. The variation lies with the distinction between a principal and a school leader. This was anticipated in the research question with the deliberate use of the term educational leader and likewise according to the participants, the terms are not necessarily synonymous. For the seven participants, acknowledgment of a school leader's authority comes automatically with the position. School principals and vice-principals are accorded the recognition that it is within their purview to make decisions on behalf of a school. At no time did any of the participants mention the need to observe certain behaviours in order to recognize that authority. However, there was significant difference between authority accepted as inherent to the position and being recognized as an

effective leader. It is interesting to note that the term educational leader was consistently used during the interview process by the researcher. Not one participant interpreted the term to mean someone other than the principal or vice-principal implying their positions as educational leaders; although they are not always effective in that role.

Participants were much more likely to describe their principal as an effective *leader* if viewed as someone who does good work on behalf of the school community. This corresponds to Leithwood and Jantzi's (1997) findings that such principals command a significantly higher degree of respect. As a result, participants were much more likely to engage in leader directed initiatives and to seek their counsel in times of difficulty. Those leaders who did not earn a high degree of respect because their actions were inconsistent with the participants' "implicit or explicit leadership theory" (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997, p. 4) maintained their authority to make decisions on behalf of the school but participants' dissatisfaction with their leadership was readily apparent. The data, then, supports the literature's conclusion that there exists a need for leaders to match their behaviours to the individual learning theories of the teachers.

This finding highlights the importance of the first two themes that emerged in the summaries: Personal Relationships and Professional Conversations. Effective leaders are more likely to successfully identify leadership behaviours that will match teachers' needs when they develop relationships with each individual through professional conversations. It is the same process teachers use when applying Tomlinson's (1995) differentiated instruction to their students. As Mr. D said "if we talk about differentiated learning for students, it's no different for adults." By getting to know each student's areas of strength and need, a teacher can tailor instruction to better meet those needs. Getting to know each

teacher on a personal level develops mutual respect and accountability which serves to improve achievement.

The second most important theme to emerge from the data, Professional Conversation, also reinforces the research findings (Blase & Blase, 2000; Brown & Anfara 2002; Hipp, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997; and Quinn, 2002), especially those of Blase and Blase (2000) who classified the results from 809 surveys which asked teachers to identify “characteristics of school principals that positively influence classroom teachers” (p. 1) under “two major themes: talking with teachers to promote reflection and promoting professional growth.” (p. 3). Although the data did not specifically mention “promoting reflection” in conjunction with talking with teachers, it is implied through the high frequency of such comments as “colleagues act as a sounding board on which to bounce ideas” and “you have to have somebody to bounce ideas off of, to talk to when you're feeling low about something that just doesn't seem to be working” from Ms. A and Ms. C respectively.

However, there did emerge a noteworthy difference between research findings of Blase and Blase (2000), Leithwood and Jantzi (1997) and this project. Many strategies suggested in the literature to encourage valued dialogue follow a structured pre- and post-observation format. Conversely, participants’ comments promote a strong preference for more informal, and frequent, conversations centered on individual needs and goals. Two examples are Mr. E’s suggestion that “there needs to be a quarterly meeting with administration to help keep me on track and to see if there is anything they can do to support the process,” and Mr. G’s comment of “where are the questions throughout the

year?” in reference to the typical TPGP supervision process of 10 minutes meeting in September and May.

Generating “valued dialogue” (Blase & Blase, 2000) speaks to several of the sub-categories, including meeting with teachers. The data clearly shows that teachers sincerely appreciate educational leaders approaching them. As urged by Mr. B, “seek teachers out to interact. Be there with teachers in their learning.” When principals initiate opportunities to have meaningful conversations, teachers feel valued and empowered. This is evidenced by Ms. F’s appreciation of her leaders stopping into her class “to make sure everything is going ok and if [she] needed anything”. The healing power of valued dialogue was also illustrated by Ms. F and her experience with the parent who was upset with her practice. Ms. F explained that after the conclusion of the situation, she went and spoke to her leader. Those few minutes of time and conversation were enough to help her better understand the process and ease her frustration. Imagine the heightened effect of that conversation if the leader had gone to the teacher instead of the onus being on her. The empowerment and value is minimized when teachers resort to seeking out principals to ask for support. It is important that teachers are not always telling an administrator what can be done for them but the reverse. As Ms. C stated:

“It shouldn’t be the teachers asking the administrator but the administrator saying to the teachers: What can we do for you? As myself, as your team/grade level administrator, as the three or four administrators in the building, what can we do for you? Not the teacher coming, saying, begging, can you do this?”

An educational leader’s need to make a difference emerged as the most compelling argument from the literature for further study in the area of effective leadership (Hipp, 1996 and Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997). Specifically, Hipp’s position that

“the most important resource in our school is the teacher, yet issues most central to the health of the teaching profession continue to be ignored” (p. 2) despite “significant relationships between leadership behaviours and teachers’ sense of efficacy” (p. 16) resonated deeply in terms of research-for-the-researcher. This contention is clearly supported by the data; perhaps most passionately by Ms. C who compels leaders to “tell teachers what they’re doing in their classrooms is good. Go and find out what is good. Give them positive and specific feedback.” Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) found that feedback is “the single most powerful educational tool available to educators” (Hattie as cited in Marzano et al., p. 84). They also stress the importance of “providing systematic feedback that will generate learning” (p. 87). The motivational effect of this type of support was also evidenced in Mr. E’s increased sense of efficacy when his leader publicly gave words to his support of Mr. E’s efforts to make a difference with his classroom-less students.

Professional Learning

Of all the issues explored in the literature review, the professional learning theories as put forth by Rogers (2002), Knowles (1990, 1984) and Mezirow (1991) were the most strongly supported by the project’s data analysis. The high frequency of participants’ comments underscore the importance of the learning conditions identified by these authors, such as the freedom of choice, the need for a challenging purpose, a climate of respect, opportunities to work with others and time to reflect. The need for these conditions did not depend on whether a participant’s learning style correlated more strongly with a behaviourist approach to learning, such as Mr. B who suggested (although not included in the data summaries) that teachers should be required to fulfill specific

continuing education requirements, similar to dental hygienists, in order to qualify for mandatory annual recertification, or a cognitivist's perspective, like Ms. C's, who places a strong reliance on professional literature to improve her understanding of best practice. Nor were the learning conditions identified as important significantly different between Mr. E and Mr. D's humanist philosophy and the emphasis they place on the need to respect the personal goals of the learner and Mr. G and Ms. F's social or situational orientation where they work towards full membership in the community of practice through interaction with others.

A very strong relationship exists, however, when Knowles' (1990, 1984) comprehensive *andragogical model* is used as a framework from which to compare the data and the needs of the adult learner. Andragogy recognizes that adult learners need to understand the purpose of the learning and its importance to their lives. This was clearly reiterated by Mr. G, who talks about the need for educational leaders to "be thorough in their explanation". As previously quoted, he stated "...you've got to completely understand why they want to go that direction. They need to eloquently and passionately voice it. Give me a logical explanation as to why we're going to do this." Ms. F supported this idea with her statement that "when the admin takes the time to explain why it helps to deal with the frustration."

Andragogy, as well as the other learning theories mentioned, advocate for the adult learner's need to choose the direction of their learning. All the participants spoke to the importance of freedom of choice, specifically Mr. D and Ms. F, although some, for example Ms. C, Mr. G and Ms. F, were more willing to concede their choices are occasionally guided by commonly established goals. This ties directly to the andragogical

tenet that adults bring a wealth of experience which influences how they interpret their world. Their experience also influences their readiness to learn and the direction of their learning interests.

When teachers' learning goals are based on their own individual or mutually developed grass root initiatives, internal motivation is strong. Knowles (1984, 1990) recognizes the power of this internal motivation while simultaneously acknowledging the motivating properties of external factors. This andragogical perspective, that educational leaders must capitalize on the external motivating properties of their position to help teachers maximize the potential of their internal motivation, is also found within the study's results.

The other necessary learning conditions established within the theories advanced by Rogers, Knowles and Mezirow: challenging purpose, respect, working with others, and time to reflect were also clearly supported by the data as they echo the major headings of the thematic summaries. The need for "challenging purpose" was thoroughly established in the summary of the Goals section. "Working with others" was a recurring theme in all sections, though most specifically in the section entitled Professional Conversations. The need for "time to reflect" was supported throughout the section dedicated to the theme of Follow Through while respect was the common thread that gathered the sections together.

Middle School

The underlying purpose of this study was to identify strategies that support middle school teachers' efforts to be more effective in improving middle school students' achievement. This importance is highlighted in the literature review by Jackson and

Davis (2000) who explain that without intense focus on improving student learning, structural and organizational changes, such as scheduling changes that facilitate professional conversation, as suggested by Mr. B and Ms. C, or removing barriers to professional development opportunities as appreciated by Mr. G and Ms. F, will have minimum impact on student achievement. The ultimate goal of improving student learning was also reinforced by participants. Mr. E and Ms. C both specifically mentioned that their learning goals are targeted to help develop their practice to better meet the quicksilver needs of their students. Developing networks that allow him to expand his horizons and those of his students is the driving force behind Mr. D's learning goals while Ms. F at time circumvents the mandated goals of her staff to pursue her personal goals because she believes them to have greater potential for serving her students.

The literature review also anticipated the major themes of follow through and removing barriers in the work of Elmore (2002) who indicates that principals and districts have the responsibility to ensure that teacher growth is supported with time and money, two of the primary resources as identified by all participants. Elmore proposes that a reciprocal process must exist between the expectation for continual improvement and the provision of capacity to meet that expectation. He also asserts that for every investment made in skill and knowledge, there is a responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance (p. 5). The comments from the interviews repeatedly echo Elmore. The participants of this project want to be held accountable for achievement of their goals. Mr E asked for regular meetings to keep him on track. Every participant wished that staff meeting agendas included a line dedicated to hearing about each others' learning; they

want to be given the opportunity to share their professional growth with colleagues. They appreciate the amelioration these strategies have on their learning. The best example of this is Mr. G's realization that despite his leaders' accommodations that allowed him to attend the ESL course at the local college, the true value of the opportunity was not realized due to the lack of follow through and accountability.

As also described in the literature review, many of the above mentioned models outlined by Jackson and Davis and by Elmore are closely related to the tenets of Professional Learning Communities as described by Dufour and Eaker (1998). They assert the need for a collective commitment of a staff guided by strong leadership as well as the importance of how staff and programmes are organized within the building. The power of a team guided by a common goal and the strength it lends to those involved was illustrated by Ms. C when she stated that "it is so much better if everybody works together" and by Mr. G's opinion that "individuals out on their own just doesn't work". It was also balanced with the understanding that common goals often require an external locus of pressure in the form of strong leadership. The acknowledgement of individual initiatives, a concern raised by many participants, within a commitment to a common goal was assured by Ms. A, one of the middle school principals and a strong believer of Dufour and Eaker. Based on her experience, she inferred that "everyone can be working on a school goal and there still be flexibility for individual or team things."

The review of the literature suggested that middle school teachers have leadership prototypes unique to their context. The research found major differences between leadership behaviours and instructional practices of principals at the elementary and secondary levels (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997, Quinn, 2002) and that elementary teachers

identify a different set of effective leadership traits than do secondary teachers (Tabin & Coleman as cited in Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997). In the literature, middle school teachers were not disaggregated to determine if they identify a leadership skills set unique to their configuration. This indicated the need for a study with a pure sample of participants from the middle school level.

However, the need for a pure middle school sample appeared redundant once the data analysis was complete. This can be mainly attributed to the fact that, with the exception of Ms. F, the participants of this project had taught at various different grade levels throughout their careers. When providing examples of effective leadership strategies, the participants pulled from their diverse experience. Elementary, middle school, and high school leaders were all highlighted in the stories used to illustrate the implementation of effective strategies. At no point did a participant mention that the unique characteristics of the middle school context warranted unique leadership strategies. Therefore, the albeit limited sample of this project suggests that the extent to which grade configuration of a school impacts leadership needs is not as important as the individual needs of the middle school teachers.

Conclusion

Limitations and Recommendations

The purpose of this research project was to answer the question: In what ways can educational leaders support the professional learning needs of middle school teachers? Specifically, the case by case and thematic summaries of 7 semi-structured interviews identified activities educational leaders currently employ to support teachers' learning and it explored teacher's and leaders' views on effective activities that could be used by

educational leaders to most effectively support individual professional learning. These activities will be further discussed below. Firstly, important limitations and corresponding recommendations must be clarified.

A significant limitation to the methodology of this project was the small sample size. Educational leaders should not allow the emergence of commonalities to suggest a one size fits many approach. The need for educational leaders to personalize their leadership strategies to meet individual needs of teachers makes it impossible to generalize how that is best achieved. They are mutually exclusive. How can generalizations based on certain individual responses be applied to other individuals when the central point is that each individual will have unique needs known only to them? Therefore, a resulting recommendation is the understanding that it is fundamental to the process that educational leaders work with individual teachers to make the determination of how to best meet their needs. To presume to suggest strategies that best meet individual needs removes that pivotal process. Furthermore, that becomes the central recommendation derived from the results:

It is imperative that educational leaders work one on one with teachers, on a professional and personal level, to establish a process that identifies learning needs and provides supports that best match those needs.

Essentially, each teacher should have their own Individualized Programme Plan developed in conjunction with their leader. Educational leaders cannot assume that one process will work for any number of teachers; it is likely to vary from one teacher to another, although there may be common elements.

However, based on the findings of this project, it is possible to answer the question: How do five teachers and two educational leaders describe their professional learning needs and what suggestions do they propose to best meet those needs? These results are able to provide recommendations from which a starting point may be established to guide leaders on how to begin the process of individualizing leading for teacher learning. However, to concisely answer even the rephrased question requires that individual voices be harmonized, albeit on a much quieter scale than attempting to aggregate the results to extend to all middle school teachers; highlighting again the limitation of using the results from a small group of respondents to speak for a much larger potential audience.

In essence, participants describe their professional learning needs as their own. They are based on various different approaches, philosophies, and learning styles. At the foundation, however, is the common need to improve practice to help students increase achievement. As thoroughly examined in the thematic summaries, the strategies they find helpful are as unique to them as they are to the profession. The following five recommendations are the backbone from which the suggested strategies should emerge.

Firstly, the overriding recommendation from the results of the participants' responses is that teachers want their leaders to make time for communication on a professional and personal level. Teachers want their educational leaders to know them, their goals, their challenges, and their strengths. This knowledge should then be used to create networks between colleagues and to provide a focus point to on-going interactions that hold teachers accountable for their learning while helping them maintain a healthy balance between work and play.

Secondly, these professionals crave opportunities to get together and share their ideas, to work together to develop best practice strategies, to commiserate, and to celebrate. They relish the power of these opportunities. Being an integral part of the decision making process when decisions affect their classrooms is vital. They understand the power of common goals to guide the direction of a school and they want flexibility to pursue their individual interests.

Thirdly, educational leaders are viewed as those who hold the keys to locked treasure chests of resources. Teachers need their leaders to develop an understanding of their areas of interest and then take the initiative to provide the necessary resources in the form of time, money, and professional literature so that those interests might be developed. Specific, timely, and positive feedback is especially important to those interviewed, especially when encouraged to take risks and try new ideas.

Fourthly, integrity shone like a beacon through the words of those interviewed. If you say you are going to do something, do it. Further to that, once something has begun, follow-up with it. Check back frequently with teachers to make sure everything is going well. Don't assume anything. Use effective communication strategies to ensure that everyone is not only reading from the same book, but is on the same page.

Finally, in view of all the day to day initiatives and strategies suggested, don't rely on, nor discount traditional professional development opportunities and their support of professional learning. However, be flexible to those who would rather pursue other paths to continuing improvement.

As previously mentioned, inherent in the rephrasing of the original question is the recognized limitation of the small sample size and its implication that these suggestions

are valid only to the individual participants. However, it should be noted that many of the themes that emerged from the data echoed those found in the literature (Blase and Blase, 2000; Brown & Anfara, 2002; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Elmore, 2002; Hipp, 1996; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Knowles, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1997, 2000; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; and Mezirow, 1991). In fact, the 18 sub-themes that emerged from the data bare a very close resemblance to the 21 responsibilities of the school leader Marzano et al. identified (pp. 42-43) in their meta-analysis of studies from 1970 to the present that met certain pre-established criteria within the domain of interest of school leadership. The sub-themes also correlate directly to the three categories of developing people: individualized support, intellectual stimulation, and modelling as presented by Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999). A visual comparison of Marzano et al.'s responsibilities and Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach's categories can be made to the project's summaries in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Thematic Categories and Sub Categories

Major Themes	Personal Relationships	Professional Conversation	Individual vs. Common Goals	Removing Barriers	Follow Through	Traditional Professional Development
Sub-Categories	Importance of Communication	Creating Synergy	Common Goals	Providing Resources	Keeping Teachers on Track	SAPDC
	Knowing your Staff	Empowering Teaches	Grass Root Initiatives	What not to do	Professional Responsibility	Professional Literature
	Meeting with Teachers	Teachers Talking to Teachers	External vs. Internal Motivation	Stoking the Fire	Opportunities for Debriefing.	Conferences
	Taking Care of Teachers	Individualization		Encourage Risk Taking		TPGP

Table 2: Marzano et al and Leithwood et al.

Leithwood et al's categories for developing people	Individualized Support	Intellectual Stimulation	Modelling
Marzano et al.'s 21 responsibilities of leadership	Affirmation	Change Agent	Ideal Belief
	Contingent Rewards	Flexibility	Input
	Communication	Focus	Optimizer
	Culture	Intellectual Stimulation	Visibility
	Discipline	Involvement in Curriculum, and Assessment	
	Relationships	Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	
	Resources		
	Situational Awareness		

It is important to reiterate that reading the literature is not enough, nor is it fair to develop an all-encompassing action plan on the results of seven interviews. It won't develop the vital relationships. For example, an educational leader who decides to facilitate getting teachers into each others' classroom as a professional development activity because Todd Whitaker (2003) suggests that it is one of fifteen things that great principals do differently will not achieve the same degree of success than if the exact same process is initiated based on teachers' interests as identified through relationship developing conversations. Involving teachers is validating. It empowers them to take ownership the learning process.

Personal Learning Experience

This personal learning experience has been fascinating, empowering, and challenging. The process of meeting with colleagues for an extended period of time to discuss focused issues was enthralling. It left me wishing I had the resources to greatly expand the scope of the project to include a significantly greater number of teachers. The high level of response I received to my request for participants validated both the topic of study and me. I was captivated by the stories of the participants. Their honest accounts of

past experiences and their recommendations for positive change were inspirational. The trust they demonstrated by sharing achingly personal moments was humbling. I was challenged as never before as I tried to let the participants' voices shine through the data analysis and remain true to their recommendations without superimposing my beliefs and opinions. Synthesizing the literature with the data seemed like a never ending endeavour as there was always one more quote or one more study that would serve to illustrate an important point.

It was my personal experience and curiosity that generated the primary question of this study and its research methods. As a teacher-researcher I was compelled to discover the extent to which my perceptions are shared with others. I discovered that my perceptions are shared by others and yet each maintains unique distinctions derived from our lived experiences. In general, the participants have also worked with leaders they feel were effective and those who were not. The specific reasons for the satisfaction or dissatisfaction varied but the commonalities came through in the themes and sub-themes of the data analysis which resonate with my experience. In terms of research-for-the-researcher, I was deeply curious to compare strategies I find effective in supporting my professional learning and growth to those of my colleagues. I expected to find differences and similarities but was often surprised at where, and with whom, the commonalities or discrepancies appeared. This is important because it served to underscore the need to avoid assumptions for those who wish to support others.

The time this project has taken to complete has made it possible to make other observations related to the results of the data analysis but that don't tie directly to the purpose of the project. The participants and I work for the same school board. We are

known to each other and frequently share stories of our experience. Due to this close network, it has been possible to follow up with the participants in a completely informal manner regarding the themes that emerged in the data analysis. It has been interesting to note that although several months have passed since the initial interviews, most of the suggestions and recommendations made by the two school leaders have yet to be implemented.

Both principals described how much they appreciate opportunities to share their learning with their teachers during admin meetings and yet neither have adjusted their staff meetings to provide the same opportunities to their teachers. In Ms. A's case, she extolled the virtues of working with colleagues towards a common goal and yet grade level common planning time in her building, whose purpose was to allow teachers to work cooperatively on instructional goals, is frequently filled with administrative tasks that prevent teachers from completing their original goal of creating language arts and math based performance tasks. Mr. B talked about how important it is for him to meet with teachers, to give them 15 minutes of his time in September to discuss concerns and issues, but there has been no indication that these scheduled discussions continued throughout the year. It was made clear by one of the participants who is a staff member in Mr. B's school that his door is always open, but as Ms. C pointed out, it works much better when education leaders come to the teachers than vice versa. An open door policy only works, if the educational leader can be found in his or her office, for those teachers who feel comfortable taking the initiative. It does not address those teachers who are too busy, too involved in their classroom, or unconvinced of the validity of their concerns. These observations solidified the need for leaders to engage in frequent integrity scans

where they take a few minutes to reflect on their own practice to ensure they are doing what they say needs to be done. However, it also leads to another compelling question: If we know better, what is preventing us from doing better? The results of this study clearly reflect the recommendations of the literature. If we know better, why are we not doing better? That, however, is a question for another time.

My ultimate purpose for this study was for my own professional learning and the difference I hope to make with teachers. To that end, I feel I have achieved success. I have learned that the most effective way to meet the needs of teachers is to ask them what their needs are and how they need them to be met. The diverse body of research is there to help guide that process and suggest strategies and options but it comes down to developing personal relationships with individuals so that the policies suggested by the “experts” can be tweaked and modified to serve those we work with. As a participant pointed out, it’s not necessary to re-invent the wheel but the process of building your own wheel certainly helps develop an understanding of how things work.

Summary

The catalyst for this research project was the author’s personal experience with effective and ineffective leadership and her curiosity to compare her perceptions with those of other teachers and educational leaders. The project was justified via the description of the need for individualized leadership to help support the professional learning of middle school teachers, the identification of issues the research indicated required further elaboration as well as research directed at effective leadership, professional learning, and the middle school context.

The basic definitions and tenets of effective leadership, adult learning theories, and the unique characteristics of middle schools were reviewed, as well as a relevant research base of these findings. The methodology and phenomenological nature of the study were reviewed for their appropriateness to its purpose and any theoretical problems and ethical concerns regarding the data collection and analysis were addressed. The results of the semi-structured interviews were presented in two different formats: case-by-case summaries of the seven interviews and six thematic summaries comprising of 18 sub-categories. A discussion that merged the literature base with the data summaries then followed. Limitations and recommendations of the project's findings were identified based on the comparison of the analysis of the interviews to the research base.

Finally, the author chronicled her personal learning experience throughout the process. She discussed the ramification of her findings to her current practice as well as to her future endeavours.

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Appendix A

Letter of Invitation to Potential Participants

179 Squamish Crt. W.
Lethbridge, AB
T1K 7R6

November 30th, 2007

Dear Teacher:

I am currently enrolled in the Master of Education program at the University of Lethbridge. In order to complete my graduate degree, I am conducting a Research Project investigating effective strategies used by school leaders that support the professional learning of teachers. I would like to meet with you to discuss your experiences with strategies that have been successful in supporting your own professional learning. I anticipate that results of this study will promote current strategies of school leaders for those new to school leadership as well as identify strategies for supporting professional development on the part of current and future middle school teachers and leaders.

I would like you to contribute to this project by taking part in an audio tape recorded interview. The initial interview will require 1-1.5 hours of your time, and will be scheduled at your convenience. Brief follow up interviews may be required for clarification and additional comments on the interview transcript and the final product. Any information obtained during this interview will be strictly confidential, manner and identifying information will not be included in any analysis or publication of the results of this Research Project. Be assured that the teachers' Professional Code of Conduct will be adhered to at all times.

Please see the reverse side of this letter of invitation for details pertaining to the nature of this study.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study. If you require any further information, or have any questions, please contact me at (403) 329-1412 or by e-mail at rebecca.adamson@uleth.ca. For any additional information or assistance, you may also contact my project supervisor, Dr. Pam Adams, (University of Lethbridge, (403) 329-2468), or Dean of Graduate Studies, Dr. Rick Mrazek.

I will contact you in the next few days via email to see if you are willing to participate and to arrange a time and place that will fit into what I know is a busy schedule.

I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Adamson

I. Purpose of this Research Project

The purpose of this research is to identify ways that educational leaders, such as principals and vice or assistant-principals, can differentially support the professional learning of middle school teachers.

II. Importance of this Research

This topic has a great deal of importance in today's schools. The underlying goal that serves as a foundation for what teachers do on a daily basis with their students is to instill a love of learning that will carry them well beyond the classroom. Teachers who are supported in their own life long learning will be better equipped to meet that goal. By identifying those leadership strategies defined as most important for teachers *by* teachers, the potential exists to greatly affect improvement and guide professional learning.

III. Details Regarding Involvement

Participants will be selected using the following process:

- Those who respond to this initial invitation through a follow-up email, to be received within one week, and who continue to demonstrate a willingness to participate following a telephone conversation intended for clarification purposes only.
- From this group the researcher will select a final group of six to eight individuals that will attempt to balance age, gender, location and experience.
- Those selected to participate will be contacted to arrange a convenient time to conduct the initial interview. Those not selected will be contacted and thanked for their willingness to participate.

Participants will be asked to:

- Identify and share their experiences with strategies used by school leaders that were effective in supporting their individual professional learning.
- Take part in an initial, conversational interview of about an hour in length that will be audio taped for transcription purposes. All interviews will take place at a time and location convenient to the participant.
- Verify the transcript for accuracy.
- Offer clarification or elaboration of comments made in the initial interview in a second interview, if necessary. The secondary conversation may be initiated by either the researcher or participant.

IV. Information Regarding Confidentiality, Anonymity, Use of Data, and Consent

Participants are assured that:

- Their participation in this research project will be confidential and the subsequent signing of the consent form will take place in the presence of the researcher only.
- If an individual chooses to withdraw from this inquiry prior to data analysis and the writing of the final report his or her data will not be used in the analysis. The validation of the interview transcripts will assume ongoing consent to participate.
- All interviews will be conducted in private at a time and location that meets the needs of the participant.

- There are no potential risks anticipated within this research project. In the event of a participant disclosing something he or she may later regret, opportunity will be provided to review the interview transcript, to verify its content for accuracy, and to request that specific comments to be removed for personal reasons.
- The researcher is the only person who will have access to the raw data (audio-tapes, interview notes) and the transcripts in electric form. Audio-tapes, interview notes and electronic data stored on an external memory device will be preserved in a secure filing cabinet for five years and then destroyed.
- Their anonymity will be completely protected by the use of pseudonyms throughout the research project both in the transcripts and in the culminating qualitative text. Any portions of participants' responses that may identify actual individuals will be replaced by pseudonyms.
- The results of this inquiry are not intended for commercial purposes. This research project is, however, part of the course work required in fulfillment of a Master of Education degree and, as such, will be shared in a written report. Aggregate results may be published in journals or offered as part of conference presentations.
- They will receive a copy of the final project report summarizing and interpreting the research findings.

V. Potential Benefits associated with participation

Participation has the potential to:

- benefit participants directly by facilitating a more reflective practice. To this end, the conversation is as important as the process of having teachers identify and communicate what strategies are effective in supporting their professional learning. Opportunities to talk about effective strategies to support professional learning, to have their voices heard and understand that their words could affect change towards a more supportive professional learning environment could be a empowering experience.
- benefit society by contributing a greater understanding of how to better support teachers in their own learning for the vital work they do. By better supporting teachers' professional learning, the learning opportunities for their students are also enhanced; which is the ultimate goals of educators.
- benefit educational leaders and stakeholders through the summarization and analysis of authentic conversations with teachers and school leaders about what strategies are most effective in supporting their journey as life long learners. The publication of which may provide insight, especially those in the formal roles of school leadership who wish they could take the time to speak with a number of individual teachers for extended periods of time about what works best in helping them get better at what they do but lack sufficient time when faced with the daily responsibilities of someone in their position.

Appendix B

Follow-Up Email to Potential Participants

Dear (Teacher's Name):

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request for your participation in the research study entitled Leading for Teacher Learning.

At this time, I would request that if you have decided you would like to become involved in this study that you indicate your willingness to participate by replying to this email and providing your current teaching assignment, your years of experience, a phone number and a convenient time at which you can be reached to discuss the details of your participation. If you have chosen to not participate, simply ignore this email.

Again, I would like to stress that your participation must be completely voluntary and that you may withdraw at any time. Below are further details pertaining to the nature of this study. Should you have any questions, please contact me at 403-329-1412 or Rebecca.adamson@uleth.ca. You may also contact my project supervisor, Pam Adams, at 403-329-2468

Thank you for your time,

Rebecca Adamson

I. Purpose of this Research Project

The purpose of this research is to identify in what ways effective educational leaders, such as principals and vice or assistant principals, can differentially support the professional learning of middle school teachers.

II. Importance of this Research

This topic has a great deal of importance in today's schools. The underlying goal that serves as a foundation for what teachers do on a daily basis with their students is to instill a love of learning that will carry them well beyond the classroom. Teachers who are supported in their own life long learning will be better equipped to meet that goal. By identifying those leadership strategies defined as most important for teachers by teachers, the potential exists to greatly affect improvement and guide professional learning.

III. Details Regarding Involvement

Participants will be selected from those who respond to a follow-up email to be received within one week and who continue to demonstrate a willingness to

participate following a telephone conversation intended for clarification purposes only. From this group the researcher will select a final group of six to eight individuals that will attempt to balance age, gender and experience. Those selected to participate will be contacted to arrange a convenient time to conduct the initial interview. Those not selected will be contacted and thanked for their willingness to participate.

Participants will be asked to:

- Identify and share their experiences with strategies used by school leaders what were effective in supporting their individual professional learning.
- Take part in an initial, conversational interview of about an hour in length that will be audio taped for transcription purposes. All interviews will take place at a time and location convenient to the participant.
- Verify the transcript for accuracy.
- Offer clarification or elaboration of comments made in the initial interview in a second interview, if necessary. The secondary conversation may be initiated by either the researcher or participant.

IV. Information Regarding Confidentiality, Anonymity, Use of Data, and Consent

Participants are assured that:

- Their participation in this research project will be confidential and the subsequent signing of the consent form will take place in the presence of the researcher only.
- If an individual chooses to withdraw from this inquiry prior to data analysis and the writing of the final report his or her data will not be used in the analysis. The validation of the interview transcripts will assume ongoing consent to participate.
- All interviews will be conducted in private at a time and location that meets the needs of the participant.
- There are no potential risks anticipated within this research project. In the event of a participant disclosing something he or she may later regret, opportunity will be provided to review the interview transcript, to verify its content for accuracy, and to request that specific comments to be removed for personal reasons.
- The researcher is the only person who will have access to the raw data (audio-tapes, interview notes) and the transcripts in electric form. Audio-tapes, interview notes and electronic data stored on an external memory device will be preserved in a secure filing cabinet for five years and then destroyed.
- Their anonymity will be completely protected by the use of pseudonyms throughout the research project both in the transcripts and in the culminating qualitative text. Any portions of participants' responses that may identify actual individuals will be replaced by pseudonyms.
- The results of this inquiry are not intended for commercial purposes. This research project is, however, part of the course work required in

fulfillment of a Master of Education degree and, as such, will be shared in a written report. Aggregate results may be published in journals or offered as part of conference presentations.

- They will receive a copy of the final project report summarizing and interpreting the research findings.

V. Potential Benefits associated with participation

Participation has the potential to:

- benefit participants directly by facilitating a more reflective practice. To this end, the conversation is as important as the process of having teachers identify and communicate what strategies are effective in supporting their professional learning. Opportunities to talk about effective strategies to support professional learning, to have their voices heard and understand that their words could affect change towards a more supportive professional environment could be a potentially empowering experience.
- benefit society by contributing a greater understanding of how to better support teachers in their own learning for the vital work they do. By better supporting teachers' professional learning, the learning opportunities for their students are also enhanced; which is the ultimate goals of educators.
- benefit educational leaders and stakeholders through the summarization and analysis of authentic conversations with teachers and school leaders about what strategies are most effective in supporting their journey as life long learners. The publication of which may provide insight, especially those in the formal roles of school leadership who wish they could take the time to speak with a number of individual teachers for extended periods of time about what works best in helping them get better at what they do but lack sufficient time when faced with the daily responsibilities of someone in their position.

Appendix C

Outline/Telephone Script for phone conversation subsequent to follow-up email

I. Thank You

- Extend appreciation for the initial indication of their willingness to participate by responding to the email.

II. Review of purpose of study

- To explore strategies of school leaders that have been effective in supporting individual teacher's professional learning.

III. Review of details regarding involvement

- Participants will be selected from those who continue to demonstrate a willingness to participate following this telephone conversation intended for clarification purposes. From this group I will select a final group of six to eight individuals that will attempt to balance age, gender, location and experience. Those selected to participate will be contacted to arrange a convenient time to conduct the initial interview. Those not selected will be contacted and thanked for their willingness to participate.
- Participants will be asked to:
 - Identify and share their experiences with strategies used by school leaders what were effective in supporting their individual professional learning.
 - Take part in an initial, conversational interview of about an hour in length that will be audio taped for transcription purposes. All interviews will take place at a time and location convenient to the participant.
 - Verify the transcript for accuracy.
 - Offer clarification or elaboration of comments made in the initial interview in a second interview, if necessary. The secondary conversation may be initiated by either the researcher or participant.

IV. Review of Information Regarding Confidentiality, Anonymity, Use of Data, and Consent

- Their participation in this research project will be confidential and the subsequent signing of the consent form will take place in the presence of the researcher only.
- If an individual chooses to withdraw from this inquiry prior to data analysis and the writing of the final report his or her data will not be used in the analysis. The validation of the interview transcripts will assume ongoing consent to participate.
- All interviews will be conducted in private at a time and location that meets the needs of the participant.
- There are no potential risks anticipated within this research project. In the event of a participant disclosing something he or she may later regret, opportunity will be provided to review the interview transcript, to verify its content for accuracy, and to request that specific comments to be removed for personal reasons.

- The researcher is the only person who will have access to the raw data (audio-tapes, interview notes) and the transcripts in electric form. Audio-tapes, interview notes and electronic data stored on an external memory device will be preserved in a secure filing cabinet for five years and then destroyed.
- Their anonymity will be completely protected by the use of pseudonyms throughout the research project both in the transcripts and in the culminating qualitative text. Any portions of participants' responses that may identify actual individuals will be replaced by pseudonyms.
- The results of this inquiry are not intended for commercial purposes. This research project is, however, part of the course work required in fulfillment of a Master of Education degree and, as such, will be shared in a written report. Aggregate results may be published in journals or offered as part of conference presentations.
- They will receive a copy of the final project report summarizing and interpreting the research findings.

V. Initial Interview

- Arrange a time convenient to the participant for the initial interview.

Appendix D

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

Leading for Teacher Learning

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Leading for Teacher Learning that is being conducted by Rebecca Adamson. Rebecca Adamson is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact her if you have further questions by email or telephone: Rebecca.adamson@uleth.ca or 403.393.1412.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master of Education degree. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Pamela Adams. You may contact my supervisor at 403.329.2468. You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting Dr. Rick Mrazek (Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subject Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge): 403.329.2425

The purpose of this research is to identify in what ways effective educational leaders, such as principals and vice or assistant principals, can differentially support the professional learning of middle school teachers. Subsequent to that, the research is intended to determine what daily activities effective educational leaders can employ that demonstrate their commitment to supporting individual teacher learning as well as exploring what teachers believe are the primary daily activities that can be used by educational leaders that most effectively support their individual professional learning.

This topic has a great deal of importance in today's schools. The underlying goal that serves as a foundation for what teachers do on a daily basis with their students is to instill a love of learning that will carry them well beyond the classroom. Teachers who are supported in their own life long learning will be better equipped to meet that goal. By identifying those leadership strategies defined as most important for teachers by teachers, the potential exists to greatly affect improvement and guide professional learning. Effective leadership is also key to building successful teams, which is a popular movement in education today with the push towards professional learning communities. Highly functioning teaching teams can have a tremendous influence on a school's climate, which in turn positively affects how teachers interact with their students, thereby greatly impacting students' learning.

Other potential benefits to this research are that it may provide guidance to those teachers new to administrative roles. It could lend credibility to strategies currently being implemented and identify areas for professional development on the part of current and future middle school administrators. Identifying a set of core leadership strategies as well as ways to individualize those strategies of effective middle school leaders would assist professional organizations and professional development consortiums in planning future continuing education programs.

You are being asked to participate in this study because as a middle school teacher or school leader your experience has provided you with an important voice and insights with respect to effective leadership.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include in an initial conversational interview approximately 1-1.5 hours in length, a follow up interview to clarify and expand upon emergent themes from the initial interview of approximately one hour, validation of the interview transcripts, and finally, an opportunity to respond to the qualitative text constructed from the data gathered throughout the interview process. Participation will happen at locations most convenient to the participants. Likely venues include classrooms after school hours or other locations within Lethbridge.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including a total time commitment of about three to four hours. In the event of a participant disclosing something he or she may later regret, an opportunity will be provided to review the interview transcript, to verify its content for accuracy, and to request that specific comments be removed for personal reasons.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research are associated with becoming a more reflective practitioner. To this end, the conversation is as important as the process of having teachers identify and communicate what strategies are effective in supporting their professional learning. Opportunities to talk about effective strategies to support professional learning, to have their voices heard and understand that their words could affect change towards a more supportive professional environment could be a potentially empowering experience.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used in the analysis. The validation of the interview transcripts will assume ongoing consent to participate.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, it will be completely protected by the use of pseudonyms throughout the inquiry both in the transcripts and in the final qualitative text. In addition, any portions of participants' responses that may identify actual individuals will be replaced by pseudonyms. Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by ensuring that only the researcher has access to the raw data (audio-tapes, interview notes) and the transcripts. Data from this study (audio-tapes, interview notes, electronic transcripts saved on external computer storage devices) will be preserved in a secure filing cabinet for five years and then destroyed. Only the researcher will have access to the raw data (audio-tapes and interview notes) and the transcripts.

The data collected in the course of this research project will be used as part of the work required in fulfillment of a Master of Education degree. As such, results will be shared in a written report and a full copy of this final report given to each participant. Aggregate results may be published in journals or offered as part of conference presentations.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix E

Sample Interview Questions/Probes

1. If we understand learning to mean processes through which we advance our current understandings, develop new ones, re-shape old ones, and adjust our perceptions, tell me about how you look at your own professional learning.
2. Describe a situation where you felt most supported in your professional learning. Talk about what made it a supported situation.
3. Describe a situation where you felt the least supported in your professional learning. What behaviours, activities, or strategies do you feel could have been implemented that might have improved the situation?
4. What role do you feel school leaders should take in supporting your professional learning?
5. Describe activities school leaders have used that have supported your professional learning.
6. Which activities do you feel were most effective?
7. Why do you feel those activities were effective?
8. Can you describe any strategies that you feel school leaders could incorporate into their activities that you feel would be supportive to your professional learning?
9. Do you think the strategies used to support teachers' professional learning should be geared toward everyone or should they be differentiated to individuals?
10. What would that look like for you?